

義妹生活

三河ごーすと

illustrated by Hiten



Days with my Step Sister



presented by
ghost mikawa

4

義妹生活



三河ごーすと

illust Hiten









藤波夏帆

渋谷夜遊び

ON A CERTAIN DAY

"ABOUT FUTURE PLANS"



When it comes to the survey about our plans for the future, there's pretty much no choice but to put "University," huh?

Especially considering how prestigious our school is, yeah.



But at least it's somewhat of a good opportunity to put more thought into your future goals, right?



My future, huh? I want to be independent and to have a job that pays enough so I can eat properly, but I've never really given it much thought beyond that.



You'll turn into an adult before you realize it, so you shouldn't take this lightly.

In that regard, Yomiuri-senpai is much closer to gainful, permanent employment than either of us. Have you decided on anything yet, Senpai?



Of course!



Would you mind telling us?



I want to be a housewife! In fact, Asamura-kun will be the one caring for me.



Wha?

Yeah, yeah. I see how it is. You can stop with the jokes now. We're trying to be serious here.



You're no fun. Then maybe a politician I guess?



How nonchalant. I don't think it's that easy to become one.

That was great help and a good reference. I guess all you need in life is to have a reliable senior at work.



Ohhhh! A positive turnaround while still giving me the cynical cold shoulder! How artistic of you. Well done.

You should be a comedian instead, Yomiuri-senpai.



Ha ha ha.

Prologue: Asamura Yuuta

The girl had cut off her long hair.

In a romance novel, something like this would be regarded as a drastic event, but in reality, it wasn't anything to be shocked or surprised about. Because it was hot. Because it was annoying to deal with. Because the person wanted a change of pace or mood. Considering all these reasons as to why a girl would possibly cut her hair, it was practically meaningless to judge this as a great change in the person's state of mind or mindset. You might even call such suspicions boorish. Thus, you should accept it as a simple event and just get used to the new hairstyle.

For myself, Asamura Yuuta, that would be the expected reaction, namely to acknowledge it as something perfectly ordinary and routine. Naturally, since we hadn't been step-siblings for that long of a time, and since this was the first time I had experienced this in person, I couldn't say this with abundant confidence. This was one of the times I'd love to ask all older step-brothers in the world for guidance.

But before that, I never would have imagined that my old man, who is past his forties, would bring home a beautiful older lady who had taken care of him at a bar he frequented. Nor would I ever expect him to get married to her. When I first heard about this decision, what first came to mind wasn't happiness and joy, but rather worry and anxiety.

Will this be okay? What if she's just deceiving him? These thoughts kept me up at night. I had witnessed the divorce between him and my real mother in person, so for me, I've never held high expectations for women in general. Fights that lasted entire nights, a distant and disinterested gaze towards her husband and child, cheating without a second thought... After being raised in an environment where neglect was practically a small break from the terror, when I heard about the divorce, I felt relieved more than sad.

My image of a woman was my own mother. She acted all-important and always right in both accusations and actions, forcing her expectations onto both me and my old man, only to act haughtily disappointed if we couldn't fulfill them. She was kind of nasty, in my opinion. As a result, I at one point started to abandon any expectations I might have had of other people. Because of this, when my new step-sister told me her own opinions on the matter, I felt more relieved than anything.

"I won't have any great expectations from you, so I want you to do the same for me."

These words sounded like pure desire for an honest and faithful human relationship. Not demanding anything from the person she'd be living with from now on, but she also wouldn't hold back more than necessary. In short, we would **adjust** to each other. A relationship that would allow us both to be honest with each other was something I gratefully accepted. That's the kind of person **Ayase Saki** is.

Things should work like that, so that we can become the kind of step-siblings my old man and Akiko-san want us to be. That is how I truly felt. However, there was one significant difference. I couldn't be bothered to fight against the immense pressure people brought with them when approaching me. I instead decided to take it in and let it blow past me like a breeze. When it comes to most complaints and objections from other people, I don't defy them.

However, Ayase-san is different from me. She wasn't happy just yielding to the eyes of the world and the people around her. In addition, she was strong enough of a person to crush anybody who dared to categorize her based on stereotypes. In order to become a person who could live independently by her own strength, she studied extensively to raise her grades, keeping top scores for every exam. On top of that, she took great care in her appearance so that any bystander would call her beautiful.

"To me, my appearance is an armament."

Earrings shining brightly on her ears, golden-colored hair shone like the dazzling sun, and yet Ayase-san fought. Witnessing her fight on a

daily basis from the front row seats, I eventually started to feel curious about her, as well as fond of her.

Then, at the end of August, roughly three months after we had started living together, Ayase-san cut her hair. That in itself most likely wasn't that exceptional of an ordeal. Only in dramas or novels does a woman getting a haircut have any particular meaning. However, another month after that, there was another change that occurred.

"I'm home, Ayase-san."

"Welcome back, Asamura-kun."

—The times we could have this kind of exchange decreased drastically.

The season had changed to fall. When I opened up our apartment's door, I announced my return from my part-time job in a quiet voice. I walked down the dimly-lit hallway and entered the living room. Empty. Since my old man is a salaryman, he was already asleep at this point, and since Akiko-san worked night shifts, she was out as well. Only Ayase-san should be awake at this point, but she was most likely studying, or already asleep, seeing as there was no response. Instead, I spotted dinner placed on the dining table, wrapped up in plastic.

"Oh, hamburger steak."

On a small note next to the plate was written 'Please warm this up in the microwave'. The rice was still in the rice cooker, and the miso soup inside the pot. I found some salad in the fridge. It was the same as always, and since I had gotten used to this procedure for the past few weeks, I warmed up what I needed to and sat down.

"Time to dig in."

I cut the hamburger steak in half with my chopsticks, and cheese appeared from the inside.

"Nice, cheese filling."

Ayase-san's cooking skills continued to improve with each passing day, and since I was only used to store-bought or restaurant hamburger steak, what Ayase-san created for me seemed almost magical. Though if I had told her that, she would probably have just brushed it off with her usual "It's not anything special."

I instinctively glanced towards Ayase-san's room. It's still a bit early for mid-term exams, but recently it seems like she's always been studying whenever I get home. We've barely been eating together lately. She's still working part-time at the bookstore same as me, but thanks to a lot of shift changes, we aren't seeing each other there as frequently either.

I wonder if she's avoiding me. I shook my head, erasing that thought from my mind. There's no way that's true. Whenever we do run into each other, she treats me the same as she always has, and since we're both in high school, there's no reason for us step-siblings to be together 24/7. And yet, the warmed hamburger steak in front of me suddenly felt cold again.

"Nii-san, huh?"

Ever since that day, Ayase-san has never called me anything but that.

Chapter 1: 3rd of September (Thursday) – Asamura Yuuta

During the final homeroom of the day, our teacher handed out homework at the end of the class.

“Alright, make sure to fill out the sheet and give it to your class representative by Thursday next week.”

These were the teacher’s final words, and the instant they were gone with the door closed behind them, the classroom instantly erupted in noise. Despite usually picking up their bags and leaving the classroom, all of my classmates remained seated.

“Hey, what about you?”

“What are you going to write?”

These types of voices filled the room. While some people took advice from others around them, others simply glared at the paper in front of them. Each of them had their own manner of dealing with the situation, yet they all were taking it seriously. After all, the paper we had been given asked us about our future plans after graduation. Our parent-teacher meetings will be held towards the end of the month. In other words, the future course aspiration questionnaire is regarded as part of schoolwork, and the teachers will be discussing it with both us and our parents present.

“I guess it’s that time of the year again...”

I fiddled with the printout in my hand and spoke to the person in front of me, who happened to be my good friend Maru Tomokazu.

“We’re second-years now. The severity of the situation is completely different compared to how it was before. But judging from your comment just now, you also haven’t completely made up your mind just yet, huh?” Maru turned around with a scowl on his face.

“‘Also?’ You too, Maru?”

“Why do you look so surprised?”

“I mean, I just expected you to tread the path of baseball.”

Our school’s baseball club is fairly strong. And he’s been a catcher, attending regularly for two years now. They might win at Koushien¹, and he might become a professional. That might not be how things will go, but considering his skill at the sport, I could see him choosing a future related to that.

“You’re totally right, yeah.”

“What? Then why are you making a face like you just swallowed a bug?”

“A bug, huh? I’ve never had one before, so couldn’t tell you.”

“I don’t think many people have.”

Well, since it’s an idiom, a lot of people probably have, but beyond that...

“Say, Asamura, even you should be able to understand that being part of the baseball club doesn’t immediately correlate to my future job being related to the sport, no? Naturally I’d be troubled about it. And also, you’re misunderstanding something.”

“What?”

“I’m not bothered by my plans for the future or anything. I’m more worried about the parent-teacher meeting at the end of the month. Not to mention that they go on for two whole weeks. So what do you think will happen as a result of that?”

“I’m not too sure, myself.”

I dropped my eyes to the printout in my hands. There were a few lines of information next to the line asking for your future plans. According to those, classes will be shorter during the parent-teacher meeting times, and classes will be dismissed during the afternoon.

“It seems like afternoon classes are gone and replaced by the meetings, huh?”

“Asamura, this means that our club training will be longer.”

When I heard that comment from Maru, I finally understood what he was talking about. Still, it surprised me. Despite his motivation for the sport, I guess even he wouldn’t want endless training.

“Of course I want that. I welcome any additional practice I can get.”

“Hmmmm???”

“However, during the parent-teacher meetings, certain members will be absent, right? There are certain types of training we won’t be able to do as a result. In other words, the training will be a lot simpler than before, making it feel less useful and fulfilling.” Maru said. “I do like practicing, but I want to do it efficiently with the amount of time available.”

It was an answer very much like Maru, someone who enjoyed spending time in video games. It made him seem like an efficiency freak of sorts.

“Asamura. Efficiency isn’t the only attraction when it comes to games.”

“My bad for using games as an example.” I put my hands together, creating an apologetic gesture.

A master of one’s craft is picky about their craft, I guess. Carelessly touching it would just give me a burn.

“By the way, is your dad coming to the meeting again? Or will it be your new mom this year?”

“Huh?”

It took me until that point to finally realize I not only had my old man at home, and that Akiko-san could possibly participate in the parent-teacher meeting, as well. But even so...

“My old man came last year, so I think it’ll be the same this year.”

When I said that, my mind drifted towards Ayase-san. Will Akiko-san come with her, I wonder?

Upon entering September, the color of the sky changed ever so slightly. The sunshine was still as strong as ever, but it wasn’t as much of a clear summer blue anymore. It was duller and greyscale like you were looking through one or two layers of glass. These thoughts came to mind as I made my way towards my apartment’s floor. The elevator stopped, but it took me a moment to start walking. It was all because of the printout I had stored away in my bag. Rather than worrying about my plans for the future, the idea of having a new mother had captured all of my attention. My old man was fairly laissez-faire when it came to my future, so he never expressed any concerns.

I wonder how Akiko-san would feel about it, though? I opened the front door, announcing my arrival, and made my way towards the living room. My guess from looking at the shoes in the entrance was correct, as I found both Ayase-san and Akiko-san sitting around the table. Akiko-san seemed ready to leave any moment, since she had her makeup finished.

“Welcome home, Nii-san.” Ayase-san saw me entering, greeting me as she raised her head.

“...I’m back, Ayase-san.” Hoping that she didn’t notice my awkward pause, I responded.

It’s been around a month since she started calling me that. However, I still couldn’t bring myself to call her ‘Saki’ in return.

“What were you two talking about—? Ah.”

“You got it too, right? The future aspiration questionnaire.”

On the table, I spotted another copy of what I had in my bag, the paper that specified the details of the parent-teaching meeting season. They were probably deciding on which day would be the best to participate.

“Perfect timing.” Akiko-san said, looking at me.

“Yes?”

“I talked to Taichi-san about how we should handle your parent-teacher meeting.”

“Mine?”

“Yes. The problem is... Taichi-san is very busy right now.”

He mentioned to Akiko-san that he was given an important project at work, so he was having trouble even getting half a day off from work. I had no idea, honestly. My old man rarely ever speaks of his job at home. That being said, he still seemed to be trying hard to make room on any other day, but his workload was too much for that, so even half a day off was too much to ask. I had been wondering why he seemed so exhausted recently. That explains it.

As a result, Akiko-san offered to go with me to my parent-teacher meeting as well. It's exactly as Maru predicted. He's not some kind of psychic, is he? Well, jokes aside, there's actually one big problem about Akiko-san coming with me to the parent-teacher meeting.

“You never told anybody at school that you're step-siblings, right? Taichi-san said he didn't want to burden you about it at all, and I agree with that.”

We were hiding the fact that we're step-siblings so that no weird rumors would go around at school. We even made it so that our last names wouldn't change until we graduated. However, if other students found out that Ayase-san and I had the same mother, they would eventually conclude that we're related. Of course, most students would be gone by the time the meeting would start, so it's not something to be too careful about—or so one might think, but Akiko-san was cautious in that regard.

“So that's what happened...”

“That's why I was thinking of coming to the parent-teacher meetings on two separate days.”

““Huh?!””

Both Ayase-san and I expressed shock at the same time. Attending the meetings on two separate days would mean...

“Do you plan on coming to our school twice?”

“I mean, it’s at least safer than holding both meetings on the same day, no?” She said, asking for our opinion. “What do you think?”

“...Are you sure?”

“Huh?”

“Well... my old man isn’t the only one who’s busy, right? You work late at night at the bar, so isn’t it already a stretch for you to come to school during the day?”

Akiko-san’s shifts were usually from the evening until late in the night, and since she had to clean up and prepare the dishes for the next day, she usually came home early in the morning and slept until the afternoon. Although she tries to match her waking hours with us on the weekends or days off work, she generally is a nocturnal person. I think it’d be pretty rough on her to make her come to school during the afternoon, let alone make her do it twice: Once for my meeting and again for Ayase-san’s. Not to mention that she’ll have to take more time off. However, Akiko-san ignored my fears with a smile and spoke in a gentle tone.

“It’s fine~”

“No, but—”

“Ah... I’m sorry, Yuuta-kun, I really have to go now.”

She glanced at the clock hanging on the wall and quickly grabbed her shoulder bag on the table, jogging to the entrance. After putting on her high-heeled shoes partway, she stepped on the ground once with each heel, knocking them fully into place. After that, she turned the doorknob and looked at me over her shoulder.

“We’ll continue this conversation later. Think it through until then,

okay?”

“Ah, yes.”

“See you later!” She said her goodbye with an energetic voice and ran out of the door with a flustered “I’ll be late at this rate!”

“Should she really be running around like that?”

“Don’t ask me. I just hope she doesn’t trip.”

“Oh? Are you leaving too, Ayase-san?”

When I turned back around, I saw that Ayase-san had also gotten up. She had a sports bag hanging down over her shoulder.

“It’s time for my shift.”

“Right. Take care.”

“Will do. Later, Nii-san.”

Ayase-san brushed past the tip of my nose. Her hair faintly swayed with every step. After that, I heard the sound of the front door closing. I had no shift at work today. The days back when I had a shift with Ayase-san every single day now felt like the distant past.

After putting my bag down in my room, I sat down in the living room. I found myself surprised at the subconscious sigh I let out. I wonder what the problem is. What am I so disappointed about? Yet for some reason I felt relieved now that I was alone.

—*Nii-san*. Every time Ayase-san calls me that, I find it hard to breathe when she’s around. What should I even call these feelings of mine? That’s a rhetorical question. I already know what they are.

“Now, then. Is there anything left to eat, I wonder...”

Night arrived. I felt like I had grown roots into the couch, but I raised myself up and opened up the fridge. I found some vegetables, but there was no meat or fish in sight. Crap, I should have gone shopping first. Ever since September started, and the number of overlapping

shifts I had with Ayase-san decreased, the kitchen work and use of ingredients changed drastically. I sadly wasn't big enough of a shut-in to force Ayase-san to cook for me after she came home late from work. Thus, we agreed that I would make dinner if Ayase-san had work, and vice versa.

That being said, what I'm making barely scratches the surface of what you could call "proper food." **Ding!** My smartphone on the table notified me of a new LINE message. The start of the message flashed up for a second on the phone's lock screen, and I could read it before the screen turned black again. It was from my old man, saying that he'd eat out since he'd be home late. He really does seem busy.

Well, that just means I have to make less food for dinner. There's still some rice left in the cooker from when Akiko-san used it, so I just have to make the side dishes.

"I guess it's miso soup, then."

Making the best meal possible out of the fewest ingredients in the shortest amount of time was the most efficient thing to do. Ayase-san usually makes her miso soup with a soup stock base, so I'll go ahead and copy her. I filled the pot with water, putting palm-sized slices of kelp in there and leaving it alone for thirty minutes. In the meantime, I should decide on what else to make. I glanced inside the fridge again...

"Eggs... That's about it, huh?"

Several recipes based on eggs came to mind. That being said, this alone won't allow me to actually make those dishes, of course. My skills couldn't keep up with the recipe I wanted to make. The one dish with eggs I could make was—

"Fried eggs?"

Maybe boiled eggs, too. Yeah, I'll just go with fried eggs instead. I took two eggs out of the fridge, putting them on a plate. One day in the past I put eggs on the table without anything and they rolled off and broke. Ever since then, I've made sure that the same mistake doesn't happen twice. I also took out some vegetables, cut them up

into big slices, stored them in a heat-resistant container, added water, and wrapped them up. I put that in the microwave, and then I waited around three minutes. If that wasn't enough, I could always cook them a bit longer. Since they'd be too unpleasant to eat if they were too hard, I would poke my chopsticks into them. If they were flexible, they were perfectly done.

I took them out of the microwave, putting them on a large plate. I can still divide them up later, and dressing can be added during the actual meal. More importantly, I should go back to the miso soup. I turned on the induction heater. From a bag I could hide my face behind, I took out some *katsuobushi*² I had found, adding it to the boiling kelp inside the pot. This should do it for the soup stock. While that's cooking, I should...

"Ah, I didn't even prepare any garnish."

This was a clear mistake in my cooking order. However, I had already memorized a countermeasure for this mishap. My savior was an object I took out from the freezer—yes, frozen chopped onions! The voice of a certain blue anime robot³ came to mind. I guess being all alone like this for too long is making me go crazy and making me come up with monologues like that. Well, as long as they're just in my mind, it's fine. Ayase-san mentioned that she wanted to live on her own after graduating from high school. I wonder if she'd have monologues at that point as well?

Speaking of Ayase-san, I took the onions Ayase-san had previously chopped up from out of the plastic container. Without natto or fried food, let's go simple today.

"It should be about time."

I skimmed out some of the contents from the pot. With this, the soup stock is completed. After putting in the onions, I let it boil. Turning the heat down to low, I added the miso. Now I had to be careful to not let it burn. I turned off the switch, and now the miso soup was done as well. All that's left are the fried eggs. While I was frying them, I realized that a bit of sweat had built up on my face.

Unavoidably so, as it was the beginning of September. There was

high humidity and heat outside, and here I was, cooking food on a stove. I turned on the A/C. With that, a two-person portion of fried eggs was done as well. It went fairly smoothly today. I didn't even break the egg yolks. After that, I finished up Ayase-san's fried egg, doing the same with the boiled vegetable salad...

Since she's going to be home soon, I could just wait for her, but I didn't feel like running into her for some reason. Keeping a bit of a distance between us would be for the best right now. That way, these feelings I have should calm down a bit. As for the note I was going to leave with the food... I was wondering what to write, pen in hand, only to start thinking about something else again. As a matter of fact, even while cooking, I had been thinking—about the parent-teacher meeting.

Not even realizing that my old man was busy at work made me feel guilty and kind of pathetic, but could we really put such a large burden on Akiko-san simply so that Ayase-san and I could spend our days at school in peace? Of course, this isn't something I alone should decide. I will have to consult with Ayase-san. So I stopped sitting around in my room like I usually would and waited for her to come home.

It's debatable if being able to waste hours just looking at your phone is a good or bad thing, to be honest. I was working through the ebooks I had yet to read, and right when I finished my second one, I heard the sound of the front door opening, followed by a quiet 'I'm back'. Must be Ayase-san. She probably considered the possibility of me and my old man being asleep, which is why she kept her voice low. Well, my old man has to put in some extra hours, so he isn't home just yet. When Ayase-san entered the living room, she seemed a bit surprised.

"You haven't eaten yet?"

"Yeah, not yet. You'll be having dinner now, right? Why don't we eat together? It's been a while."

Ayase-san nodded.

"Perfect timing. There's actually something I wanted to discuss with

you...”

Both Ayase-san and I went quiet for a moment, only for us both to speak up at the same time.

““About the parent-teacher meeting...””

Surprised by each other’s statement, our gazes drifted towards the other. With such odd timing, we both couldn’t hold back a faint smirk. I see, so she was concerned about it as well.



“Let’s talk about it while we eat, okay?”

“Got it. Let me put my stuff in my room.”

While Ayase-san was changing, I warmed the miso soup and fried eggs up and set the table. After we both sat down, we started eating with our chopsticks. Honestly, ever since I began to cook myself, this is what makes me the most restless of all. I can’t help but watch the

other person take their first bite before I can eat anything.

“Mm. Delicious.” Ayase-san said while taking a bite of the fried egg.

“Glad to hear it.”

“It looks visually appealing as well. You’ve gotten a lot better. Did you leave mine soft-boiled on purpose?”

“I figured it’d make it easier to eat.”

Both Ayase-san and Akiko-san liked to eat their fried eggs seasoned with salt and pepper, but my old man and I are of the soy sauce faction. After we noticed the differences in our tastes, we left it to the other person to add the seasoning, so the middle of our table turned into a banquet of different seasonings. With that in mind, I decided against seasoning the fried eggs during the cooking process in the first place.

That resolved the problem of seasoning, but tastes when it came to the actual meals are even more complicated. After watching Ayase-san and her eating habits for a while, I noticed that she clearly preferred it when the egg yolk was only soft-boiled. When it was hard-boiled, she’d eat it with miso or some other soup at the same time. That’s when it dawned on me. Since my old man and I eat our fried eggs with soy sauce, it doesn’t matter if the egg yolk is hard-boiled, but when eating a hard-boiled fried egg with only salt and pepper, it can make your mouth feel dry.

“You really keep a close eye on these things.”

“And yet I didn’t even pay attention to what we still had in the fridge, so I feel bad more than anything. If I had noticed that it was practically empty, I would have gone shopping on the way home. So I just used some green onions.”

“Ah, I didn’t tell you about that.”

“No, it’s my fault for not checking. Even though I knew you had work today.”

“But I should have—”

“No, I didn’t—”

We looked at each other, flashing wry smiles.

“So, about the parent-teacher meeting,” I brought up the main agenda of this conversation. “If people find out that we’re siblings, it’ll cause a lot of trouble—but that’s only for our own convenience, nothing more.”

Ayase-san nodded. I continued.

“That’s why I don’t think it’s right for Akiko-san to carry an even bigger burden. I’d feel bad stealing time from her on two separate days.”

“I was also thinking about how selfish that was.”

“I personally don’t mind if people find out that we’re siblings. But this isn’t just my problem alone.”

Ayase-san nodded once more.

“Thus I wanted to discuss this with you.”

“Same here. It’s not something I can decide just on my own. But I’ve also seen Mom working so hard to the point that she almost collapsed.”

So that’s...

“That’s even more of a reason not to, then. I don’t want either my old man or Akiko-san forcing themselves to do something for our sake.”

“Yup. It’s decided then,” Ayase-san said, and I nodded in agreement.

Once again, I realized that the way we think about things is oddly similar, especially during times like these.

“If my old man really is that busy, then let’s have both of our meetings on the same day. That’ll save Akiko-san one trip to the school.”

“Agreed. Not to mention—” Ayase-san muttered. “It isn’t just because she’s busy. I want us both to have a joint parent-teacher meeting, which Mom can attend once.”

Her voice was awfully quiet, making me wonder if she actually wanted me to hear this, or if these words just simply slipped from her mouth.

“Okay, I’ll let Mom know then.”

“Let her know that I feel the same as you about it.”

“Got it.”

Both of us had finished eating around the time our conversation ended. Ayase-san grabbed her tableware and was about to stand up when I stopped her.

“I’m sure you must be exhausted from your shift, so let me take care of that.”

“Then let’s just do it together,” Ayase-san said with a smile.

How long has it been since we stood next to each other doing the dishes? While holding a vague and meaningless conversation, we made our way through washing the dishes. Since we didn’t even use that much tableware, there may not have been any need to do so, but I just felt like doing it. Or did Ayase-san feel that way too, by any chance?

We talked about things that had happened at school, books we read recently, and funny videos we found online. Our dishwashing was done in no time. After Ayase-san finished washing the final plate with care, she immediately returned to her room. This blissful time lasted for only a brief moment.

“But this is fine.”

In this world, there are bound to be siblings who end up distanced from each other because of the smallest trigger. I should count myself lucky to be able to do housework together like this. I should be satisfied with this—Or so I told myself.

When our parents decided to get married again, they surely must have considered our feelings, worried if high school students of the opposite sex would be fine living together. I bet that my old man and Akiko-san both want us to get along. I couldn't bring myself to betray their hopes and wishes. That's why I have to suppress these feelings of mine, put a lid on them, and lock my desires away. After all, Ayase-san is my step-sister.

1 Where the Japan National High School Ball Tournament is held

2 Small pieces of sliced dried bonito

3 Doraemon

Chapter 2: 3rd of September (Thursday) – Ayase Saki

The chime rang, signaling the end of classes for the day. I grabbed my bag and was about to leave the classroom—

“Saki!”

A voice called out to me, making me stop in my tracks. However, I didn’t turn around. I simply let out a sigh. I can guess the identity of the person by voice alone, and I knew this would happen, that she would stop me like this. But oh well, I guess.

“What?”

“Jeez! Don’t ignore me!”

“I wasn’t ignoring you. I stopped when you wanted me to. So what’s up?”

“Hmph, so petty! There’s no need to rush things. I swear, young people these days are always in a rush about everything!” Maaya crossed her arms, but the fact that she’s a high school girl herself makes her argument sound invalid.

Maaya—Narasaka Maaya—pretty much is the only good friend I have at school.

“Right. What did you want?”

I could see several other classmates tagging along after Maaya. Usually, I don’t bother remembering the names and faces of classmates I’m not interested in, but I knew some of them at least. They were the ones who were present during our trip to the pool this past summer break. Along with Maaya, it was a group of seven boys and girls, out of which one boy spoke up now.

“We’re going for some karaoke after this. How about it?”

Who was he again? I directed my gaze at Maaya, who waved something like a ticket in her hand.

“I got a discount ticket~”

I see.

“Um...”

“Are you not interested in karaoke?”

Previously, I would have just said something like ‘Yep’ and been done with it. However, the faces of the people behind Maaya, filled with both anxiety and a faint level of anticipation, left me unable to do so.

“Thanks for inviting me, but I have some urgent business to take care of at home, so I can’t, I’m sorry.”

I refused in such a polite fashion. It surprised me. Not to mention that I did it with a smile. These joyful memories I acquired that summer day came to mind, and I didn’t want to ruin them. I don’t want people to hate me without reason, nor do I want to trouble them.

“See you.” I lowered my head slightly and walked out of the classroom.

From behind me, I heard the quiet voices of my classmates, sounding taken aback. They were wondering why I was in such a rush. As well as—

“It’s a shame. Right, Shinjou?”

Oh yeah, his name is Shinjou. Though I don’t remember his full name. Never mind that though. I walked down the hallway, changing into my outdoor shoes at the shoe locker. I actually need to get home quickly today—Before mom leaves for work.

The streets of Shibuya are always crowded 24/7, whether it’s a weekday or on the weekend. Since I was trying to rush home, the people filling the streets were in my way. It was causing me a needless amount of stress, but there was nothing I could do about it. I knew from the very beginning that smoothly making your way

through the streets of Shibuya was pretty much impossible. Since my mother has worked here basically forever, I knew this place like it was my backyard.

From the main street, I went down a smaller street inside the residential district. There, I was finally allowed to start jogging. After turning a corner, I spotted a familiar flat. It hasn't been that long, but for now it was the flat Mom and I called home.

"It sure feels weird."

Back in May, I walked a different path home. At the beginning of June, I moved to this flat with Mom, so I've been taking this way home for barely four months at this point. A simple four months, and I have yet to remember any shortcuts, let alone the establishments and restaurants I passed on the way. Even though this was the same Shibuya I should be used to. The closer I got to school, the more familiar the surroundings and billboards looked, and yet my surroundings changed significantly. To the point where the scenery around the flat felt like a different country.

Long ago, everything seemed so simple. I think I was just despairing because of the environment I was raised in. That's why I tried to forcefully change the situation. I deeply respected my mother, who raised me despite working in a bar located in the entertainment district, and worked my hardest so that nobody could blame or attack my mother. I felt the gazes from the people surrounding my mother watching me closely as well, and in order to cast them all aside, I knew I had to study like my life depended on it.

I made my way through the front entrance of our flat. After punching in the security code, the automatic door opened, and I passed by the manager's room into the elevator. Ah, I forgot to check our post box. Well, that's not important right now. I made it up to the third floor. Just a bit more, and I'll be there. I was running short on breath because I was hurrying home, and the sweat on my body grossed me out. I hate the feeling of clothes glued to my sweaty skin. *I wonder if I can even take a shower before I have to head off to work*, I thought as I unlocked the front door of our apartment.

"I'm home!" While saying this, I spotted Mom's working shoes still

there at the entrance.

Upon entering the living room, I spotted Mom. She had her makeup on, and she looked ready to leave.

“Welcome back.”

“You’re not gone yet?”

“Yes. I contacted them, so I don’t have to rush things.”

“Seriously...?” I let out a sigh and sank down into a chair.

The exhaustion of running beneath the bright sun finally caught up to me. Phew, I made it in time. The reason I had been rushing home this desperately was because I needed to talk with Mom about something important—the parent-teacher meeting. I got a copy of the future aspiration questionnaire this morning, which I immediately told Mom about so that we could discuss the details in regards to her schedule. I thought we cleared up everything, but at the very end, she said ‘There’s something I need to talk about’, which was why I rushed home. However, seeing Mom acting as nonchalant as ever, I started to think that maybe it wasn’t that important after all?

“You could have just told me via LINE, you know?”

“I’m a bit old-fashioned when it comes to that, so I was worried I wasn’t able to completely convey what I wanted through a message only.”

“Ah, right... I guess?”

I somehow understood what she was talking about. Mom can be a bit clumsy when it comes to that. The fact that she’s a good bartender shows how skilled she is at having an average face-to-face conversation. On top of that, she most likely just feels anxious using only text to convey what she is feeling amidst this social network system era we’re in.

“Got it. I’ll hear you out, but just give me a second.” I went to my room, threw my student bag on the bed, and grabbed the sports bag I prepared beforehand for my shift later. “I’m ready now. So what did

you want to talk about?”

“Well...” Oddly enough, Mom was hesitating, like it was a subject that was a bit hard to bring up. “How’s it going at school with Yuuta-kun?”

My heart skipped a beat out of pure shock.

“What do you mean?”

“Lately, you began calling Yuuta-kun ‘Nii-san’ at home, no?”

“That’s true, yeah?”

“I was wondering how things were going at school.”

Wha...? My heart was racing even more violently now, but I was confident I could hide it. I was fairly good at keeping a poker face.

“I mean, we’re in different classes.”

We barely even meet at school, and even if we did, I wouldn’t just call him ‘Nii-san.’ That would just create weird rumors. Well, it’s not like we actually did, so I have no way of proving that. Of course, I wasn’t totally lying. Since we’re in neighboring classes, when it’s boys and girls mixed P.E. classes, we do run into each other. We’ll use the same courtyard or gym hall, so even if we’re careful, we might bump into each other. In fact, that has bound to have happened before, particularly our gazes meeting.

“But nothing’s really changed.”

“That means you’re still hiding the fact that you’re siblings from everyone at school?”

“I think so. We haven’t told anybody.”

Except for Maaya, that is.

“Then this could be problematic.”

“Problematic? I thought we were talking about our parent-teacher

meeting?”

“We are. You see, Taichi-san is very busy right now.”

“I see...”

According to what Mom told me, it would be difficult for step-Dad to participate in the parent-teacher meetings. Mom obviously doesn’t want to force him, so she’s thinking of going to both meetings. If she went to both meetings for Asamura-kun and myself respectively on the same day, she would only have to take one day off.

“We’re a small bar, after all. I can’t take too many days off.”

The bar Mom is working at only has the manager, Mom, and a part-time employee as staff. That’s why she’d rather not leave too much of her schedule unfilled.

“That being said, if I went to both of the meetings on the same day, there’s a chance people might find out, no? You wouldn’t want that, right?”

A chance of people finding out that Asamura-kun and I are step-siblings. But even so—is it really that troublesome? After all, Asamura-kun and I eventually have to become proper siblings.

“Honestly, I don’t particularly mind either way.”

“Huh?” I subconsciously raised my head, looking at Mom’s face.

“It just doesn’t feel like he’s completely accepted me as a mother yet. Although it makes me feel lonely to admit that.”

I could barely contain my surprise. I see. So that’s what she meant when she said she didn’t want people to know that Asamura-kun and I have the same mother. Why was I just thinking about myself again? Mom made a wry smile, narrowing her eyebrows—Even though I don’t want her to feel that way at all.

She’s trying hard to be a good mother for Asamura-kun. I wouldn’t ever want her to feel inferior. I was about to speak and say “Mom, I...” but my voice caught deep in my throat. At that moment, I heard

the front door opening, followed by Asamura-kun's voice. The moment he entered the living room, my throat automatically produced a voice.

"Welcome home, Nii-san."

"I'm back, Ayase-san."

It took Asamura-kun a second, but he still called me 'Ayase-san', like he always has, even now. Well, he can't just suddenly start calling me 'Imouto-san' or something like that. It's not weird for him to keep saying what he has been so far. However, 'Ayase' was the name of a stranger, at least for him.

"What were you two talking about?" He glanced at my face, then Mom's, and then spotted the handout lying on the table. "Ah."

"You got it too, right? The future aspiration questionnaire."

"Perfect timing." Mom said, looking at Asamura-kun.

"Yes?"

"I talked to Taichi-san about how we should handle your parent-teacher meeting."

Mom told Asamura-kun everything she had just explained to me. Wondering how she was going to convince him, I sat in silence, not commenting at all. However, when she got to that point, she said—

"That's why I was thinking of coming to the parent-teacher meetings on two separate days."

""Huh?!"

I let out a flabbergasted voice. She said it like she had been planning on doing so from the very beginning. But isn't that too hard on her? At the very least, it seemed like Asamura-kun agreed with me.

"My old man isn't the only one who's busy, right? You work late at night at the bar, so isn't it a stretch to make you come to school during the day?"

Asamura-kun was exactly right. And yet, Mom was smiling like there was nothing wrong with that. She quickly packed her bag and left, as it was time for her shift.

“Should she really be running around like that?”

“Don’t ask me. I just hope she doesn’t trip.”

What is this? Why didn’t she tell me the same thing when it was just the two of us talking? I’m confused. I can’t stay here. If I do, I’ll end up relying on Asamura-kun. My poker face will shatter. So I grabbed my sports bag.

“Oh? You’re leaving as well, Ayase-san?” Asamura-kun said as he turned towards me.

“It’s time for my shift.”

“Right. Take care.”

“Will do. Later, Nii-san.”

My response was pretty much automatic at that point. I’ve been getting used to calling him that, which was why the words came out of my throat even without me meaning to. But still, Mom’s face came to mind and wouldn’t leave. Even though she looked so hurt until the moment Asamura-kun arrived, she showed none of that to him. She’s got an even better poker face than I do.

She doesn’t want Asamura-kun to be overly considerate of her. She was pretending that she doesn’t want people to find out that we’re siblings, all for our sake. She gave up on doing both our parent-teacher meetings on the same day. Surely, that is the correct choice.

Even while working during my shift at the bookstore, that entire ordeal wouldn’t leave my mind. What should I do? What is the right choice to make?

“Excuse me?”

While I was busy organizing a shelf, a voice called out to me. It was a mother pushing a baby carriage, carrying a large-sized nursing

magazine in her hand.

“Yes, how can I help you?”

“I was wondering if you had last month’s issue of this magazine? I missed my chance to buy it.”

When it comes to monthly magazines and issues, we usually send the ones that don’t sell back.

“I’m sorry, but no... Should I see if I can order one issue?”

Despite not having any confirmation if the publisher had any issues left, I still responded with these words.

“No, it’s fine. It just had an article I really wanted to read. Thanks anyway.”

“You’re welcome...”

“I’d like to buy this one, then.” She handed me this month’s issue, so I led her to the cash register.

I can’t make her carry such a large magazine while pushing the baby carriage, after all. Once we finished the payment, I politely sent her off, and she left the store. After that, I went back to my work once more, back to thinking once again. And I made up my mind. I can’t allow Mom to feel this way. Once I get home, I have to talk things out with Asamura-kun.

Having found this determination, I felt like something unpleasant inside of me had suddenly cleared up. In order to try to rationalize and erase these vague feelings I have for him, I’ve been trying to keep my distance, so it feels like it’s been a long time since I actually spoke to him at length.

Once my shift was over, I immediately headed home and quietly opened the door. I let out a quiet ‘I’m back’. Because it’s so late, it wouldn’t be weird for him to be in his room. I walked down the hallway, past the living room, and quietly knocked on the door to his room. However, no response came. I figured that he might have fallen asleep, or was taking a bath at that moment, so I entered the

living room—and there he stood.

Not to mention that the dinner was fully prepared on the dining table, and there was no sign of him having eaten already. I was confused, so I asked him about it, to which he stated that he wanted to eat together with me. I don't know why he suddenly brought that up, but it also matched perfectly with my own desire to talk with him.

““About the parent-teacher meeting...””

Our voices overlapped. Were we thinking about the same thing? That thought alone made me feel at ease. So we both decided to talk things through while eating dinner. It seemed like Asamura-kun had been concerned about it the whole day, just as much as I had been.

“That's why I don't think it's right for Akiko-san to carry an even bigger burden.”

You're not fair, Asamura-kun. This isn't fair at all. Just as I am trying to get over my feelings, you make my heart tremble over such a minor thing. Knowing that he didn't want Mom to go through any trouble made me feel genuinely happy.

“It's more than just being a burden for her. All things considered, I simply want Mom to come to both our parent-teacher meetings.”

I know how hard she's trying to become Asamura-kun's new mother. So with that, we made up our minds and accepted the fact that the people at school might find out that we're siblings. To us, this was a joint decision.

Chapter 3: 4th of September (Friday) – Asamura Yuuta

Us two men got up early in the morning. We were sitting down at the dinner table when my old man suddenly started talking.

“Akiko-san and I thought about this together, you know.”

“Together?”

I was in the middle of putting some rice in my old man’s rice bowl, but I paused in confusion. I wanted to ask how these two lovebirds, who constantly talk past each other, even reach something that could be called consensus. When I asked him about it, he said we could discuss it via LINE, despite being too bothered to chat with me. I guess he’s changed in his own right. That aside, however...

“I’ll take time off work and come with you to your parent-teacher meeting after all. It’s true that my company’s buried with work at the moment, but I can’t just let Akiko-san carry all the weight on her own.”

“Oh, about that, Dad.”

I told him about my discussion with Ayase-san that had happened the previous night, and explained how we decided that we’d hold both of our meetings on the same day so that Akiko-san would only have to take one day off. As a result, he wouldn’t have to take time off work either.

“Whoa... Are you really sure about that?”

I nodded.

“Ayase-san and I decided it together, so it’s not just something I came up with on my own. We’d rather not go about it behind your backs and make more work for you, and we think that hiding the fact that we’re siblings just feels unnatural.”

When I finished telling him all of that, he made a happier face than I had seen on him ever before.

“I’m sure Akiko-san will be happy about that as well.”

My old man then told me about everything he had discussed with Akiko-san. Apparently, she wanted to be as best of a mother for me as possible. Personally speaking, since we’re not children anymore, and already on our way to adulthood, since my father got remarried, I might accept this as him getting a new wife, but not necessarily that I have a new mother or anything like that. My old man and Akiko-san probably felt the same, and yet he continued, saying that what Akiko-san wanted wasn’t to simply be my guardian until I was of age.

“Akiko-san told me that she wants us to be a family, you know. And she believes that we can be. If not, then the connection we forged through our marriage would be wasted.”

Connection, huh? I could understand where she was coming from. She didn’t want to become my mother simply because she had to care for me. Speaking from just our relationship, we are stepmother and stepson, but she wanted to go beyond that and treasure the time the four of us have together as a normal family.

“That’s why I’m sure she’ll be happy beyond words if she finds out that you accept her as family, Yuuta.”

A brief glimmer of guilt filled my heart. I really didn’t think about it too deeply.

“Good morning, you two.” Ayase-san entered the living room.

“Ah. Good morning, Saki-chan.”

“Ayase-san, what are you going to do for breakfast?”

She got up a bit later than usual, so I wanted to ask just to make sure. Usually, she leaves for school before me, meaning there’s a chance she might just skip it today.

“Ah, sorry, I had you prepare it for me. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“No, we just got up ourselves, so have a seat. Here, your miso soup, rice, and chopsticks.”

“Sorr—thank you, Nii-san.”

“You’re welcome. Ended up a bit late today, huh? Did you oversleep?” I asked on a whim, but Ayase-san turned the phone in her hand around, holding the screen out towards me.

Is she telling me to look?

“...LINE?”

“Mom said she’d be home in two hours, so we’ll continue our conversation from yesterday.”

Right, that makes sense. Ayase-san mentioned that she was going to tell Akiko-san about what the two of us had decided. Now that it’s morning, she probably received a response. Their exchange continued for a bit after that, which was why she ended up being late for breakfast.

“She was happy.”

“Right?”

Seeing my old man smile after hearing Ayase-san’s confirmation, I once again felt a faint pain in my chest.

“So, about the day for the parent-teacher meeting, I was thinking of leaving it up to Mom.”

“Which day does she prefer?” My old man asked just to check.

“If possible, September 25th.”

“The 25th... So, a Friday.” I checked the calendar and commented on the date.

“No good?”

“Nope, totally fine. If that day works best for Akiko-san, then I’ll try

to get my meeting then. So, Ayase-san—”

If Ayase-san and I want our meetings to be on the same day, we would have to consult our respective homeroom teachers and explain our rationale. Namely, as our mother will not be able to take more than one day off, we'd like for our meetings to be put together. If we do that, both of our homeroom teachers will find out that we're siblings.

“Yeah, it's just as you said, Nii-san.”

“If we were both in the same class, I could just tell them myself.”

“It's fine, I can take care of it.” While taking a bite of rice, Ayase-san asked me to let her take care of it.

Until a short while ago, Ayase-san wasn't the best at this sort of thing, but I guess she's also changed a lot herself. After she finished eating, she took care of the dishes and left the house around her usual time. After she left, my old man headed off to work, and lastly I also left.

As I made my way to school, I noticed the sky was a clear blue, and the breeze felt a bit hotter than yesterday. Akiko-san wants us to become a family. Maybe I should call Akiko-san ‘Step-mom’, just like Ayase-san calls my old man ‘Step-dad’. Not because I necessarily accept her as my mother, but so that we could become a fully-fledged family. Is that why Ayase-san is calling me ‘Nii-san’ now?

The school gate finally came into sight, and I decided to shake off all the thoughts spinning around in my head.

Five minutes before the first period, right as the first chime rang, Maru waltzed inside the classroom from the back door. Those who have morning practice generally arrive at class barely before it starts. Of course, it wasn't just Maru from the baseball club. The folks from the other sports clubs filed in, quickly filling the classroom. Once Maru sat down in front of me, he seemed to remember something. He turned around towards me.

“Say, Asamura.”

“Hm?”

“Last summer break, you went to the pool with Narasaka and the others, right?”

“Uh... yeah, what about it?”

“There’s a rumor going around that you and Ayase had a good mood going.”

“A good mood...?”

“Course, a rumor is a rumor. But considering how she’s been acting lately, it’s gotten to the point where I can’t deny the possibility.”

What the hell kind of ‘possibility’ are you on about?

“So yeah, how’s it looking with Ayase?”

Naturally, I was taken aback. So much that I missed my chance to respond properly and instead answered the question with another question like the idiot I was. Instead I asked why he was curious about that.

“Asking about a friend’s progress and status in love is what a true friend character in a romance game would do, no?”

“I think you should draw a firmer line between your fantasies and reality.”

“Hmph. To be honest, that rumor only reached my ears a few minutes ago. There’s no evidence to back it, either.”

So that means it’s a rumor inside the baseball club, huh? A rumor that Ayase-san and I are getting along pretty well. I wonder why? I figured out my feelings for Ayase-san at that pool day during summer break, and at the same time I decided that I had to get rid of this feeling no matter what. After all, she’s my younger sister, and that’s how she expects me to treat her.

Forget about it. Cast these feelings aside. I’ve been working on it. But for whatever reason the people around me seem like they’ve seen

right through me, and they keep reminding me of that summer memory. While wondering what I should do about this, I was preparing for the upcoming class when I spotted a certain printout inside my bag. When I saw it, I finally remembered. Ayase-san and I had agreed that we are fine with everybody finding out we're siblings.

"Listen." When I got that far, my voice went quiet.

This wasn't something everybody needed to hear, only certain people. Maru inched closer to me, understanding that what I was about to tell him would be hard for me to say. As expected of my best friend.

"This is about Ayase-san and I—"

I started my explanation, saying that Ayase-san and I had become step-siblings after our parents' remarriage. I also added that we were both done hiding it, but that we also didn't want to just tell everyone about it, either. I made it clear that I told him about this because I trusted him, and he responded accordingly.

"I'm not the type of person who would spread around such delicate information."

"That's a huge help."

"Still, this explains a lot of things."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

Maru seemed almost satisfied.

"You suddenly asked me about Ayase, acted like you wanted to know more about her, which honestly surprised me, and even after that, you were acting oddly attached to her."

"Attached? Hey, now."

"Right, poor choice of words. But I was just worried in my own right, you feel me?"

Back in June, there was a bad rumor going around about Ayase-san. Since she has such flashy looks—which is actually something she does as self-defense—and because she wandered around Shibuya late at night, it's easy to see why people would come to the wrong conclusion, which can cause rumors. That's why he must have been worried about me.

"It's just a misunderstanding. That's all."

"Seems like it. My bad. I was wrong. But now it all makes sense. Also, speaking of Ayase, I indirectly talked badly about your younger sister, so I'm sorry."

"Don't be like that. You just didn't know."

"I totally thought you had fallen for Ayase."

These words made my heartbeat accelerate drastically. I could feel sweat building on my palms. Fallen for her... come to like her... love her... When it's brother and sister, it's not weird to like each other... but...

"That's not..."

"Right, my bad. I didn't need to add that. But I'm relieved now. If you had actually fallen for her, you might have bumped into those guys without any chance at victory. As your good friend, I didn't want to see you get hurt."

"Those guys'?"

"You didn't know? After summer break ended, Ayase's popularity changed."

According to Maru, she's softened up a lot more towards the people around her, and she's gotten popular even with the guys who saw her as just another delinquent and were scared of her. Since she stopped being completely solitary, more and more guys are talking to her and acting interested in her. As you would expect, some of these guys could be quite high-spec.

"Although it pains me to admit it, I could never see you winning that

race... However, since you're her older brother, you wouldn't even participate in the first place."

"Of course I won't."

"Great, great." Maru seemed satisfied with something.

As I watched him, I started thinking. Just as Maru said, since we're brother and sister, having a chance or not doesn't matter in the slightest. No matter how many guys might approach her, that is. Worrying about one's little sister and the potential threat of some insects approaching her is most likely only something a fictional older brother would do. At her age, she should be able to take care of herself, and intervening as her older brother would be taking things too far. Whether as her actual older brother or just as a step-brother, I should act rationally. So what if there are guys approaching Ayase-san with those kinds of intentions? It's got nothing to do with me.

Our teacher walked inside the classroom and began the morning homeroom. Once that was over, they spoke to the people who finished their questionnaires and decided on the days for them to meet and hand them in. Just as I had discussed previously with Ayase-san, I tried to stay away from the other students as much as possible, and explained our family's circumstances to the teacher, telling them about our desire for both Ayase-san and I's meetings to be on the same day because of our mother's circumstances.

"I see. So for you—your stepmother will be participating?"

"Yes."

After this brief exchange, I headed back to my own seat.

Classes ended for the day. Today, I had another shift at the bookstore where I was working part-time. Right after the last homeroom ended, I grabbed my bag. While I was changing into my outdoor shoes at the shoe lockers, a rather noisy group of people approached the same area. I turned towards them because I heard a familiar voice, and I spotted Narasaka-san in the center. In other words, this group must be some of the people from my neighboring class.

She was surrounded by all her friends, grinning as usual, and even talking to every single person around her so that they wouldn't feel left out. Ayase-san was among them as well. She walked at a constant pace not too close to them, but also not too far away, participating in the conversation from time to time. Seeing her flash a smile while doing so, I grabbed my shoes and hid in the shadows of the shoe lockers, leaving through the front entrance while trying not to be seen. I'd feel bad if I forced her to show consideration towards me—or at least that's the excuse I made for myself.

Ayase-san was smiling. I think that was the first time I'd ever seen her smile with her friends like that. Good for her. Really. She used to be somewhat isolated from her classmates, so this is much better. It's just like Maru said. Ayase-san has changed. The way she forces herself to not rely on others, it's easy to see her as arrogant and repelling, but that was all because she didn't know how to open up to others, like she had no other choice but to push them away. She learned that being independent wasn't the same thing as cutting off all your connections.

She was making such a gentle smile, hanging out with people I didn't know—so why am I being plagued by these complicated feelings?

By the time I reached the parking lot near the train station with my bike, the sky was already dyed a deep red. The sun has been setting earlier and earlier recently. It's already September, but the days will only start getting shorter from here on out. I entered the back office, changed into my uniform, and headed out into the main store. First on my agenda today was organizing the shelves. I passed by the cash register, greeted the manager, and made my way towards the shelves. I started with the paperback shelves, working my way from the back to the front.

In most bookstores, you generally organize the books according to the publisher, not the author. If they are from the same publisher but a different label, then they are displayed on a different shelf. And then, once you reach the shelf for that label, you arrange novels and books up by their authors' initials, in most cases at least.

For example, there's this label called MF Bunko J¹, and then there's a random number Mi-10-16 on the back cover. This shows that this

label has a lot of authors beginning with 'Mi', and this particular novel was published by the 10th author, and it's the 16th volume—that's a simplified way of explaining it, at least. By simply relying on this number, it's easy to organize the books that are out of order.

I had the late shift today, which meant that arranging the new releases and adjusting the stock was already complete. Everyone else had already made more space for the new releases, so my only job was to put the random books scattered around back in their originally intended locations. From time to time, I would see random books put on the wrong shelves, and I would return them to their original spot, which is quite simple work of course, so I think I blanked out for quite some time during it. Just before I reached a state of complete zen—

“Ah, Junior-kun. Perfect timing.”

When I turned around, the familiar Japanese beauty with long black hair was standing there, which I had already guessed from the voice. She was carrying a mountain of paperback books. Reading the nametag on her uniform was practically impossible in that state, but I knew her. She's my senior at work: Yomiuri Shiori.

“Excuse me? What's that complex expression for, hmm?”

“Ah, don't mind me, I was just about to reach enlightenment, so you took me by surprise.”

“Post-nut clarity, I see.”

“I don't quite think that quite fits the situation.”

“Oh? Then go ahead. Tell me what it really means.”

“Can you stop acting like some old man trying to tease an embarrassed answer out of an innocent woman? I'll sue you for sexual harassment.”

“Oh, my. Gender equality is a wonderful thing.”

I don't think this is the time for you to admire that.

“Now, now. That doesn’t matter right now, my dear Junior-kun. A beauty like me is carrying a mountain of books right in front of you, so isn’t there something else you should be saying?”

“Ah, right, I’ll take that.”

The books she was carrying were all ones that we were going to replenish the shelves with. When someone purchases at the register, we can check if we still have more copies of that book left in stock. What’s actually terrifying to think about is the fact that back in the Shōwa era², they actually relied on records alone when it came to the inventory of their books. Of course, they used paper to track their stock, and if you took stock, you could check how many copies you had left in the store.

The problem at hand was that they relied solely on the records written down day by day. Right now, everything happens with a click thanks to the extensive database. The mountain of books I accepted had to be added to the shelf right in front of me. When I got a closer look at the books, they turned out to be from a long-running series that had been made into a multi-season anime series.

“I wonder why this sells so well? I mean, I know it’s interesting, but still.”

“You said you read it, right, Junior-kun?”

“Yes. Oh?” Something inside of my memories lit up. “I see, the anime just started.”

“Exactly. We already are using POPs³, and we also have a lot of them displayed on a different shelf.”

When Senpai said that, I turned to look where she was pointing. In the corner of the paperback shelves was a small pedestal that was showcasing a mountain of books, all of them with covers showing. The books that are currently selling aren’t simply put into a shelf where you can only see their back cover, but rather receive this level of advertisement where they’re laid flat. Next to them were hand-written advertisement cards and placards, called POPs, as well.

“I was the one who made that POP there.”

“Is that so?”

“I went out of my way to write ‘I bawled my eyes out with this, enough tears to fill an entire bowl!’, you see.”

“Won’t they get angry at you for false advertising?”

Knowing Yomiuri-senpai, that must be some kind of weird joke again. I should check the POP later... Wait, but if I check it, that just means that I’m already dancing on top of her palm, doesn’t it?

“Wait. Then...”

That was when I finally figured out the big picture. If it just started airing, and since it’s September right now, it must be the fall season of anime. In that case, this series will probably be selling really well for the next three months until December. I accepted the books from Yomiuri-senpai and looked at them.

As expected, it had a paper wrapper on it, which read ‘Anime currently airing!’. The publisher had probably reprinted a lot of copies to coincide with the anime, thus this paper wrapper had been added. At the same time, this wrapper also announced that there would be a new release going on sale next month.

“So a new volume will come out...”

“Junior-kun, you seem quite exhausted.”

When Senpai said that odd comment, I glanced at her, confused.

“What do you mean?”

“That you lack your usual energy.”

“I ate properly, though.”

“Okay, that’s not what I meant. You used to know about a new release of a series you like at least three months in advance, no?”

New releases of books or manga are usually announced three months before the release date. In other words, that's how we, as bookstore employees, find out about it, too.

"...I guess so."

"You've been so devoid of energy lately, Junior-kun."

"That's not..."

"Shhh, I've seen right through you. The fact that you've lost interest in a new release from a series you used to like is a pretty significant incident, no?"

"Really? Maybe."

No, she was totally right. Not too long ago, I would never have forgotten the next release date of a series I enjoyed.

"Maybe you're just lonely because you don't have as many shifts with Saki-chan as you used to?" Yomiuri-senpai showed a suspicious snicker.

"You should be careful, Senpai. That kind of smile could make you lose your popularity."

"Now now, tell your older sister about all your problems, young lad. Come on, open your heart and jump into my arms."

"You still sound like an old man. Also, we're siblings, so there's no way that would be true."

"What exactly would not be true?"

"That I'm lonely. Why would I be lonely just because I can't work with my sister?"

"Since I don't have an older brother, I don't think I can argue much in that regard. And I guess you make a lot of sense, but she's your step-sister, no?"

"Even if she is, a sister is a sister," I said. I stopped myself from

saying anything more than that.

“Rational answers are so boring, though.”

“And why does that matter?”

“Alright then, let me tell this dejected Junior-kun of mine something interesting.” Yomiuri-senpai raised one finger. “There will be an open campus at my university soon-ish, so how about stopping by?”

“Open campus? Is that when universities and specialized schools invite people curious about studying there so they can check it out?”

“Exactly. Once you’re surrounded by cute university girls, you’ll be back in high spirits in no time.”

Just as she said, I bet an average guy would be excited to have a bunch of beautiful university girls like Yomiuri-senpai around them. When I saw her talking with some fellow students a while back, her friends and circle members were all attractive ladies. However, there’s a fatal flaw in this master plan of hers.

“Senpai, you attend a girls’ university, no?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“How will I, a man, be able to visit during open campus then?”

“Oh my goodness, where did our gender equality go?!”

Sadly, the times have yet to progress enough that a man could study at a girls’ university. I understand that she’s worried about me and my recent lack of energy, but I still can’t respond with a smile. I myself had been wondering why I was so down in the dumps. There shouldn’t be any reason for me to feel this way.

My shift at work ended, and I went straight home. Upon arriving, I found dinner and a small note on the living room table. Even though we ate dinner together yesterday after so long, today I just got a note. Ayase-san clearly has no intention of leaving her room. She’s not avoiding me, is she?

I was filled with regret for not being able to meet Ayase-san face-to-face, and I realized that clearly showed that I was lying to Yomiuri-senpai during our previous exchange. Deep inside my mind, I could hear her words again. It can't be helped, right? After all, Ayase-san isn't my actual sister.

1 The label that publishes Gimai Seikatsu

2 1926.12.25-1989.1.7

3 Point-of-purchase advertising, can include stickers on the floor and other advertising around the product, any way to grab the customer's attention

Chapter 4: 4th of September (Friday) – Ayase Saki

The bell rang, signaling the end of 4th period, and the atmosphere inside the classroom changed to something more relaxed and listless.

“Food time!”

Looking at the girl who raised a war cry, I could only shrug my shoulders. How can she have so much energy every single day? Well, to each their own.

“Lunch, lunch~”

She sounds like she’s dancing... Wait, she actually is? While I was waiting for the girl—Narasaka Maaya—to approach me, I realized that several other classmates were following after her.

“Ayase-san, I’ll be going to the cafeteria, so you can use this.”

“Thanks.”

The girl sitting next to me grabbed her wallet and walked out of the classroom. After seeing her off, I pushed her desk next to mine and took my lunch out of my bag.

“Sorry that there are so many people today, Saki!”

“I’m fine.”

With this, I’ve secured Maaya’s desk. She walked towards me with her lunch dangling from her hand. But what about the group of four to five boys and girls behind her? What about their desks? While I was confused, they simply called out to the people close to them, securing more desks. Around half of our classmates would usually eat at the cafeteria, or eat in their respective classrooms. If a seat is open, as long as you don’t use it without consent, there usually isn’t any trouble. I personally am of the faction that finds eating with someone

else a chore if I'm forced to go through something bothersome like that.

Even so, I don't let it show on my face. The reason for this is simply because some of the people eating with me are those who were part of the group I went to the pool during summer break with, or those who have started talking to me more frequently lately. Shortly afterwards, several desks were arranged into somewhat of a circle. Time to dig in.

"I wonder what's today's side dish?"

"Hey, Maaya, why are you looking at my lunch?"

"Ohh! Rolled omelet!"

"And why are you reaching for them with your chopsticks?"

"Half! Give me half!"

"Fine, geez."

I split my rolled omelet in half with my chopsticks and put it into Maaya's lunch box. She put a piece of fried food in mine, probably as a repayment.

"Isn't that a bit too big for an equal exchange?"

"It's fine, totally fine~ Ah, Yumicchi, your salmon looks great, too!"

"If you share some of the Narasaka Household's secret fried food with me..."

"Exchange established!"

I see. So that fried food is a special recipe from her family. Feeling curious, I took a bite of the piece she offered me. When I bit into the inner part, I tasted juicy and soft chicken that melted away inside of my mouth. It wasn't very fatty, either, so I didn't have to chew so much.

"Delicious..."

“Right, right? Narasaka-san’s fried food is just genius.”

“What’s genius about fried food?” Maaya faked a serious expression, which caused the people around us to burst out in laughter.

Even I found myself smiling.

“Maaya, did you fry this twice?”

“Mnom?”

“There’s no need to talk with your mouth full. Just let me know later.”

“Mmnom.” With her mouth full of fried chicken, she shook her head vertically.

For crying out loud, everybody started laughing again. At first I thought that building friendships with random people was a waste of time, and decided to only stick with Maaya, but now I was consciously moving towards constructing new relationships. After a brief interval of only eating, the conversation continued. Honestly, I’m lost a lot of times when listening to their conversations, and I just can’t muster up any interest. Even so, while acting like I was enjoying myself, I started to truly feel that way. I guess a human’s heart is all too simple to influence. Is there any name for this phenomenon, I wonder?

“Hey, everyone—”

With these words asking for everyone’s attention, I raised my head.

“Why don’t we go somewhere again this month?”

The person who spoke up was... Um, who was it again?

“Ohhh, nice idea, Shinjou. Where are we going? And when?”

“Maybe karaoke? On Sunday when we all have time.”

Oh yeah, he’s Shinjou. Everybody else agreed to his proposition, saying stuff like ‘Sounds nice’ or ‘It’s been a while after all’ and so on.

“What about you, Saki?” Maaya practically invited me, but I hesitated.

Usually, I’d decline, saying I have to study or work, but...

“Um...”

“Do you have a shift at work? Or is it studying this time?” Maaya seemed to have guessed my thoughts, and offered me an escape route.

“I don’t have a shift on the 27th. Usually, I study on days when I don’t have any work, but...”

“Oh? Well, Saki-chan does study passionately. But what should we do then? Hmmm.”

“Oh, yeah. What about a study session, then?” Shinjou-kun said while glancing at me for some reason.

“Ah! But where?”

“The library?”

“Maybe at my place?” Maaya said.

The others got noisy. I guess that makes sense. If everybody present came we’d be like... six people? But I do know that her living room could fit that many people. She also added that her parents were taking her younger brothers out on that day. She looked at me, curling up her arms like a beckoning cat, inviting me. I guess if I want to create new relationships, this would be the best place to start, huh? If I start interacting with more people besides Asamura-kun, I might forget about these forbidden feelings I have for him.

Upon returning home, I started preparing for dinner and tomorrow’s breakfast. Oh yeah, I might as well make some fried food. I could even use some for tomorrow’s lunch box. With that thought in mind, I opened up the freezer, taking out some chicken. I recalled Maaya’s fried food that I ate today. She probably fried it twice. Once at a low temperature, and then again at a high temperature. Usually, that would take longer than I was willing to spend, but I guess I should

challenge it today. It's not like I have any shifts at work today.

For dinner, I grilled some sliced and dried horse mackerel, and made some eggplants, fried food, and miso soup. As a finishing touch, I added some sesame oil, switching up the taste for today. While I was working on dinner, Step-dad came home. Right after, he turned on the switch for the bath. While waiting for the water to warm up, he ate dinner with me.

"Oh, this miso soup tastes a bit different from usual, no?"

"Is it weird?"

"Not at all. It's delicious. I'm sure Yuuta will be happy, to."

His words came out of nowhere, but I somehow managed to keep a poker face.

"Thanks... I'm glad to hear that."

"Akiko-san would sometimes use sesame oil as well. Is this an Ayase recipe by any chance?"

"...Something like that."

I think Mom taught me about using sesame oil to change the taste. After taking a bath, Step-dad immediately went to bed. I finished frying the fried food and wrote a note for Asamura-kun for when he's home from work. After I returned to my own room, I began studying for my classes tomorrow.

I blocked off any outside noise with my headphones and listened to some lo-fi hip-hop beats, opening up my textbook and notes. Since the teacher for tomorrow's math class asks questions by seat number, there's a good chance he'll ask me for a solution. With that in mind, I should work through the questions just to be safe. Even while doing so, I kept thinking about next Sunday, as well as what happened at the pool during summer break.

If I really wanted to keep my distance from him, it would be the best choice to not make food for him or leave him a note. However, for a brief moment, that sounded less like keeping my distance, and more

like rejecting him, and I didn't really want to go that far. I didn't want to push him away. That would hurt even more now than when he was just a stranger. Is the reason I feel this way because of my responsibility as a part of his family, because I can't damage our give & take relationship, or because—?

Is this the shape my lingering feelings are taking? I don't completely understand it all, myself. In the end, I couldn't solve a single question.

Chapter 5: 24th of September (Thursday) – Asamura Yuuta

It may have been because of the unusually cold fall, or maybe it was because my days lost their color after Ayase-san and I started talking to each other less, but September seemed to pass incredibly quickly, and we seemed to quickly reach the day before the parent-teacher meeting.

“This is just a hypothetical question, okay?”

Lunch break arrived. While poking my chopsticks at my side dish, I called out to Maru amid the background noise inside the classroom.

“When you end up with a broken heart...”

“Hm?” Maru glanced up.

“If you really need to get over your feelings for that girl, what do you do?”

“With your established conditions being far too vague for me to guess, there’s no way I can give you a concrete answer, Asamura.”

“Right, my bad.”

“Well, it’s fine. So, just as an example... when it’s a girl close to you that you meet on a daily basis, and a girl that you only know online, the difficulty of getting over her can be completely different.”

Ahh, that makes sense. The distance between you and her is crucial, huh?

“Then a girl who’s pretty close, I guess? Hypothetically.”

Maru looked up from the lunch box in front of him and glanced at me. He then directed his gaze downward again, picking up some rice with seaweed. Considering how deeply he was able to stab his

chopsticks into the rice, he must have at least 1.5x the amount of rice in there than I have in mine. I guess that's what you'd expect from a sports club regular. After chewing for a moment, Maru took a sip from his tea-filled bottle.

"How about hanging out with a lot of other girls? It's hard to really define what romantic feelings are. Maybe something else would develop from that."

Romantic feelings. When I heard that term, I froze up for a second. While hoping that he didn't notice my hesitation, I nodded, urging him to continue.

"However, these kinds of burning feelings might just be a hallucination as well. If you meet another good woman, you might find out that your feelings weren't all that serious, and your feelings might change a lot faster?"

"I wonder if they will really change... Also, What kind of environment would even allow someone to easily encounter women like you're suggesting?"

"Asamura... Where are you looking? Listen, there are at least twenty girls in our classroom. And even beyond that, there are plenty of chances around you, no?"

Plenty of chances, he says.

"But isn't that just you paraphrasing the idea that half the world is women, so you have no lack of ability to have new encounters?"

"But it's true. In the end, the chances of you having a new encounter completely depend on your own mental attitude."

"Another woman, huh?" I started thinking.

Simply existing together and actually building a relationship that goes beyond being strangers are two simple yet completely different things. However, it is a thankful piece of advice from my good friend. I should probably give it some thought. Especially when it comes to the mental attitude he mentioned. Basically, this is what he was trying to say.

Normally, we don't see the strangers around us as individuals who have any connection to us. Strangers are random, alienated people. If not for Ayase-san's mother marrying my old man, I probably would have never seen her as someone more than a girl who wears flashy clothes and who attends the class next to mine. Even if we had gotten to know each other through some kind of event, the closest we'd have gotten was greeting each other in the hallway, I'm sure.

Yet simply because she became my step-sister, we were forced to live together, deepening our bonds and knowledge of each other, and the more I learned about her, spent time with her, the more my feelings were kindled. If that's the case, then I just have to actively work to try to get to know the girls around me. If I do that, there might be a woman who can awaken my feelings even more than Ayase-san—

"Then again," Maru continued, "if you can't see anybody around you as a potential target, then just approach the people closest to you. The theory is that conquests are easier the more information you have."

"What are you talking about?"

"A common opinion."

And what kind of sources support this common opinion, huh? But that does make sense. A stranger who is close to me. That would mean someone like—

'Now now, tell your older sister about all your problems, young lad. Come on, open your heart and jump into my arms.'

The first person who came to mind was my senior at work and university girl Yomiuri-senpai. The other day, she said something along those lines, offering to hear me out if I wanted to discuss my problems.



“Well, setting aside the whole thing about another woman, maybe just challenging something new in your life might do wonders to distract you from her?” Maru said as I was lost in thought. “Anyway, just cheer up.”

“Yeah... Wait, I mean no. That was just a hypothetical question.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I just gave you an example.” Maru put the lid

back on his lunch box. “Now then, if you would excuse me.” He said as he left the classroom.

He finished eating his lunch, which was significantly bigger than mine, before I could polish off mine, and then left for lunch break practice. I’m worried he might ruin his stomach from eating that fast. I let out a sigh, ate the rest of my own lunch, and put my lunchbox away.

I had another shift at work that day. When I parked my bike in the bike rack like always, I once again thought about how it’s fall season now. Even though I had been pedaling with all my might, I wasn’t sweating nearly as profusely as I did back in August. I entered the bookstore, and the vice manager called out to me.

“Asamura-kun! Please take care of the register.” I moved over towards the cash register and started serving the customers. In all honesty, standing at the register is fairly relaxing. You simply scan the barcode on the books, and the machine calculates the exact price for the purchase. Of course, that doesn’t mean the amount of work at the register is insignificant. For example, you have to prepare covers depending on the size of the books, and offer the customer a plastic bag depending on how much they’ve purchased. That hasn’t changed.

If a customer with small children is trying to pay while taking care of their large amount of books, you would want to calm them down with a smile in the advent that they drop their wallet, and you also have to be careful to not put the coins in their change on top of each other, so that way the customer can easily confirm that they are getting the right amount of money back.

In recent years, the method of payment has changed quite a lot, which also impacts work at the cash register. Not only can you pay in cash, but also with various credit cards, and even smartphone apps. You have to remember all of them in order to properly handle every possible customer, so it’s quite right that a lot of employees start to dislike working at the cash register after a while. By the way, that ‘quite right’ just now basically means ‘I see, that’s true.’ I read that in a novel recently, and I actually like the sound of it a lot, but there are not many chances to actually use it, so—

“Yo, you can take a break now.”

“Hmm? Ah, yes.”

Someone called out to me, which pulled me back to reality. The more monotonous work you do, the more mechanically your body will move when performing that work, which really shows how well the human limbic system is calibrated. At some point, I had started just doing it automatically. I couldn't help but admire that about myself. Thanks to that, I managed to calm down and think good and hard about what I had been worried about this afternoon and how to resolve it. It's just as Maru said: Branching out and doing new things might be just what I need to do in order to get over these feelings. And the one person close to me who knows something new I can try is most likely—

“Do you have a moment, Junior-kun?”

“Ah, Yomiuri-senpai. What is it?”

She had her fingers interlocked behind her back, looking up at me.

“Do you think you can spare some time for me today after our shift?”

“For what?”

“I was thinking of showing you all sorts of new fun stuff, you see.”

“With pleasure!”

“An immediate answer. Wow, Junior-kun, have you always been this bold?”

“Ah, well, I was just thinking of doing something new anyway. Maybe I came across a bit too excited?”

“Not in the slightest; I shall allow it. Not to mention that young people like you are supposed to challenge themselves and keep up this kind of curiosity.”

“Thank you very much.”

This makes it the second time Yomiuri-senpai has asked me out like this. The first time was for a movie. It's thanks to her that I got to watch a movie I almost missed during one of its final late showings. I guess university students are in an entirely different league from high school students. That's Senpai for you. It's like she totally realized what I was troubled about.

"Alright, that's decided then!"

"But what exactly do you have in mind? It'll be pretty late by the time our shift is over."

"Hee hee hee. I shall take you to the world of adults, Junior-kun." Yomiuri-senpai left these words behind and returned to her work.

Even when we ran into each other during the rest of our shift, she would just smile at me without saying a word. Just what is she talking about?

"So this... is the world of adults..."

Really now?

"It's an essential course for a working member of society!"

"Are you some kind of old man from the Shōwa era or what?"

"Have some faith in Onee-san, okay?"

I really can never tell how serious she is with these kinds of things. After giving Yomiuri-senpai a dubious gaze, I looked up at the building in front of us. On the sign above the entrance, I could see the words 'billards' and 'darts,' as well as 'Golf simulation.'

"I want to practice some of my golf swings!"

"You really are an old man with old-fashioned hobbies."

"How disrespectful."

"So we'll be checking out this 'Golf simulation' thing, then?"

“You’ll see soon enough!”

With that, Senpai took the lead, and I quietly followed after her. After taking the elevator up, she took me to the golf facility inside the building, which I had heard of before.

“This is your first time, right, Junior-kun?”

“My first time playing it, yeah. A friend of mine who’s into these kinds of games has played it before, and he told me about it, but that’s about all.”

Inside a booth split off from a small box, deep in the back, was a golf course. The green grass continued endlessly below the blue sky. In the distance, I could see the faint curves of a mountain range. Of course, this was all just footage projected on a screen, as we were still in the middle of Shibuya.

“Nature really is wonderful, huh? Ah, the green is beautiful.”

“I don’t think this is very different from just putting on a screensaver on the TV at home.”

“Junior-kun!” She spoke with a reprimanding tone. “No emotion whatsoever! Understand this poetic sentiment! You’re not some withered old man, but a young man in his prime!”

“Right...”

Even if you tell me that...

“You’re looking at these beautiful swaths of nature, yet you don’t feel anything? You’ll make me cry.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You can swing your club and land the white ball right into the hole, and you’re surrounded by nature on every side. How invigorating! What a great feeling!”

“Is that how this works?”

“It sure does. This is why all exhausted middle-aged men go play golf.”

Yep, it's a hobby for old men, just as I thought.

“Stop nitpicking about every detail. We're wasting our time here.” She complained and held out a golf club towards me.

You have to keep in mind that this is my first time ever handling a golf club. How do I even hold this thing? Like a baseball bat? When Yomiuri-senpai realized this, she used her fingers to correct my hold. Wow, her nails are so beautiful to look at...

“Hmm, like this, I think? Come on, try it.”

“I see.”

With my left hand supporting it, I held the club, used my thumb to cover it slightly, and then held it in my dominant right hand. This apparently is how Yomiuri-senpai holds a club. I imagine there are many other ways of doing so, but she just said ‘Look into it yourself later’, so I didn't ask. Either way, this is the beginner's guide, so it should be fine.

“Come on, put some more strength into your shoulders.”

Senpai grabbed both of my shoulders and pushed them down. When she did so, they ended up slouching a bit. I guess that makes sense. When you put strength into your hands, you automatically relax your shoulders.

“That's it. Just like that. And now you just have to hit that ball towards the screen.”

She had just called it ‘beautiful nature,’ and now she's calling it a screen. She sure knows how to ruin her own immersion, huh?

“Can I really hit such a small hole on the first try?”

“Hmm... since it's your first time, it might be a bit hard to hit the hole. You just have to get used to it, so it's fine.” Senpai said. She backed away out of golf-club-swing range.

It's similar to baseball swings, but it's dangerous to swing a club around if there are people nearby, so after making sure that nobody was standing behind me, I swung my club. It made a sound like I was cutting through the air, and the club was so surprisingly heavy that it felt like it almost pulled my arms out of their sockets. But I wasn't even close to the hole.

"Swing and a miss."

"It's a lot harder than I anticipated."

"Not at all. Lend me the club for a second."

I handed her the club. The ball was automatically set on the course once more. She grabbed the club and performed a few test swings. Once she was satisfied, she stood in front of the ball and swung with all of her might. The ball flew off with a sharp clacking sound. The golf tee that had been stabbed in the ground danced through the air. The system traced the ball's trajectory, which drew a beautiful parabola as it arched back down to the ground. The words 'Nice Shot!' appeared on the screen, and the ball rolled along the green grass a few times before finally coming to a stop. Finally, it showed the distance she had hit the ball.

"Phew, that one flew a long way. Ahhh, such free-dom~" She sang while holding the golf club almost like a rifle.

"What's that about?"

"It's from an old movie¹. That one sure blasted off, though, huh?"

The number on the screen must have indicated that it was a good result, judging from how happy she is, but I couldn't really comprehend why she was so happy about this.

"That's how it is. Simple, right?"

"It sure didn't look it, but I understand the possibilities of humanity now, so thank you."

After that, we both alternated shooting around ten more balls. At first, I would either miss the ball entirely and hit empty air or hit it

off in random directions, but maybe thanks to Yomiuri-senpai's good teaching, I eventually managed to hit the ball directly ahead of me.

"You've got talent, all right."

When I started to get used to it, I was greeted by a refreshing feeling of accomplishment, like I was hitting the ball straight ahead at a batting center. This does feel pretty great. Although it never said 'Nice Shot!' for me, which is a shame. Seriously, how is she this good? Is she actually an old man?

"Senpai, do you practice golf swings regularly?"

"Hm? Well, from time to time."

"Wow."

"Are you surprised?"

Maybe. She looks like a Japanese beauty with long and beautiful black hair, but I'm pretty sure she's a middle-aged man on the inside.

"Maybe not surprised. I guess it makes perfect sense."

"And what exactly do you mean by that?"

"To me, you are an experienced senior above everything else."

"I believe I once again must draw your attention to, you know, my sex and the fact that I am a woman."

"You're free to change your approach, but here I am, completely agreeing to the fact that taking a high school student to some late-night golf is a total university girl move."

She is gorgeous, she's always funny, and it's always pure joy to talk to her. If we were together, I'm sure that every moment would be pure bliss. I have never been part of any club, but interacting and spending time with a senior in a club would probably feel like this. There's no mistaking that hanging out is fun at all times.

"Junior-kun."

“Yes?”

“Feeling a bit better?” Senpai asked, flashing me a faint smile.

Only then did I realize why Yomiuri-senpai had brought me to this place. She knew I was constantly troubled by something, and wanted me to forget about all of that at least for a short bit of time. That’s why she invited me here.

“Yes. It was lots of fun.”

“Very well, very well.” Yomiuri-senpai tapped me on the shoulder.



Yeah—I really like her as a person. Those were my honest feelings, and yet I heard someone’s whisper. That summer, in that one moment, that emotion I felt inside of me, which surged up from deep down my throat when I saw the girl cross her fingers as she stretched her arms far above her head—that emotion is different from what I feel right now.

After swinging at the golf balls for another hour, my arms had gotten

quite good and tired. I started to miss more, and the balls stopped flying as well, so one of us brought up the idea of slowly making our way home. It had gotten pretty late, and the parent-teacher meeting was the next day.

“Before that, I need to visit the bathroom for a moment.”

“Then I’ll clean up the rest of the gear here.”

“Please do.”

I grabbed the golf clubs we had been using and took them with me. Yeah, that was fun. Although my arms had started to feel numb, I’m glad I came here. As the outsider kind of personality that I am, I always thought that playing golf was part of the world of light, but if it’s just an indoor simulation like this, I guess it is fun. Maru was right. Trying something I normally wouldn’t has allowed me to vent some stress and frustration.

While I was thinking about that, I ran into an individual who just walked into the establishment—a single girl. Her hairstyle and clothes didn’t stand out too much, but there was one thing that drew my attention to her—Her height. She’s quite tall, to be exact.

“Wait... that girl, where did I...?”

I dug through my recent memories and found something. She’s the girl who sat next to me during my summer classes. That means she must be a second-year in high school like me. She was all alone, so she probably came here on her own. Despite it being so late? She’s playing golf by herself? She started checking rooms, looking for an open space where she could play. Since Yomiuri-senpai and I just finished, she came walking directly towards me. Right as she walked past me, she seemed to notice that I was there.

“You are...”

“What a coincidence. Good evening.” I bowed slightly in greeting.

“Good evening. Um, we haven’t seen each other since last summer break, yes?”

“I think not, yeah.”

“...Um, are you still attending that preparatory school?”

“Yes, though only on Saturdays.”

Telling her this much should be fine. We know each other from preparatory school after all.

“I see. I’m actually attending it on a regular basis right now.”

I was surprised to hear that. After all, once summer break ended, I hadn’t run into her once. When I asked her about that, she mentioned that she doesn’t have any classes on Saturday. She doesn’t like the cramped classroom on those days, which is why she’s using the self-study room at the preparatory school.



“The self-study room?”

“That’s right. It’s a lot more convenient for me than a library room.”

“I see... Ah, my name is Asamura Yuuta, by the way.”

“I’m Fujinami Kaho. Summer and sail make Maho.”

“Sale?”

“Not the selling one, but the sail you set up. The name is written fairly simply with kanji, so it’s easy to remember.”

“Ah, Like a ship’s sail. I see.”

“See? You’ve already remembered it.” She flashed a faint grin.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

If she introduces herself as ‘Fujinami Summer Sail’, it really is easy to remember. She looked like more of a docile girl to me, but I guess she’s got surprisingly good communication skills. She bent forward slightly, giving me a formal ‘Please take care of me’ greeting. I followed suit, doing the same. Right as this exchange ended, Yomiuri-senpai came back.

“Ah, you were on a date.” Fujinami-san glanced at her, and then back at me.

I frantically shook my head.

“No no, she’s just my senior from my part-time job. We’re not like that.”

“I see. Then if you would excuse me.” She once again bowed slightly and entered the booth Yomiuri-senpai and I had been using.

I did the same, and when I raised my head, Yomiuri-senpai was standing in front of me.

“Hey hey hey, Junior-kun.”

“Welcome back, Senpai.”

“What’s that nonchalant expression about? Who was that girl just now?! What kind of playboy are you to hit on another girl while you’re on a date with me?!”

“Wha, ah, I’m sorry...?”

She called it a date, but I don't have enough confidence to see it that way. I bet that from a university girl's point of view, a high school boy like me is nothing but an adorable junior. The way she teases me like this is proof enough of that. Earnestly apologizing was the best choice. If I tried to argue, she'd just play devil's advocate and bully me even more.

"It's not fun if you apologize immediately."

"Is there any need to make it fun?"

"Well, it's gotten fairly late today, so I guess I'll let you off the hook with this."

"I've accepted my fate, so please let me go."

Thankfully, Yomiuri-senpai forgave me with a smile. After we finished paying at the front desk, we returned to the train station. Just like with the movie before, I sent Senpai off to the place where I could see the parking lot, and then pedaled my way home on my bike. While enjoying the calm breeze Shibuya at night blessed me with, I once again thought about what Maru had said. Trying out something new, huh? Oh yeah, that reminds me. I'm attending that preparatory school, but I haven't even fully used all of their faculties.

"The self-study room..."

While storing my bike in the parking lot of the flat, I started thinking that maybe I should check it out sometime.

1 Sailor Suit and Machine Gun

Chapter 6: 24th of September (Thursday) – Ayase Saki

‘I’m taking a detour on the way back from work, so I’ll be home late —,’

Why am I worried about letting a ‘read’ notification appear on a LINE message I’ve received? The instant this message from Asamura-kun popped up on my locked phone screen, I could feel my heart racing. It’s Yomiuri-senpai. I only needed to read the initial part of the message, but I already knew. He’s heading out somewhere with that senior. If I open the message, it’ll send him the ‘read’ notification, which basically would be a justification for him having fun somewhere with her, and since I couldn’t decide on what to do about it, a few minutes had passed and I was still glaring at my phone screen. Honestly, it’s ludicrous, and I’m well aware of that.

Where could you find a younger sister, a second year in high school, who is this bothered by what her older brother is doing when he’s not with her? But if I actually read it, then I can’t just say ‘You’re pretty late today,’ and I also can’t use the convenient excuse ‘Sorry, I didn’t see your message.’

“I’m such an idiot.”

Acting this way isn’t fair at all. This type of manipulative behavior is what I despise the most. When jealousy is involved, it lowers a human’s intelligence to grade school level, or even lower. It’s wrong for me to feel this way. I’m supposed to be his younger sister. While looking at the dinner on the dining table, I let out another sigh.

I set up today’s dinner with dishes that should help with summer fatigue. For the main dish, I prepared keema curry, which basically uses minced meat. As for spices, I relied on ginger, garlic, and red pepper, as well as some cumin. Said cumin is quite docile but superb. After all, they’ve been using it since ancient Egypt as a natural scent. Of course, with a long history comes odd superstitions, so when I saw

the phrase ‘Add cumin to a rice dish in order to avoid your beloved one from losing interest in you’, I found myself thinking of it as some form of bug repellent. I used a spoon to scoop up some of the keema curry. The scent drifting up from it caused me to blink a bit before I put it in my mouth.

“Urk, spicy...”

I know I’m not good with spicy stuff, so what am I doing? It was so spicy that I even teared up. Seriously, what is wrong with me? My heart is going crazy. I recalled the conversation I had with Maaya at school today.

‘How can you always be so energetic, Maaya? Can you just forget all your troubles?’

There’s no person in the world who never worries about anything. That’s why I wanted to know how she manages to never show it. However, Maaya’s response couldn’t have thrown me off more.

‘Just do something!’

‘D-Do what exactly?’

‘Anything new!’

She raised one finger and then added another one.

‘Or, do something you’ve never done before, and really bite into it!’

According to what Maaya told me, the second you are troubled by something, or you start worrying about something, your thoughts end up stuck in a loop. You come to a mental standstill, not progressing anywhere at all.

‘That’s why you force yourself to walk forward!’

What a positive mindset. I couldn’t help but admire her. Of course, I think she’s probably wrong, but... something new, huh? I don’t want to stay like this, with my thoughts spinning in circles. Just like Maaya said, I should break out of my shell this weekend.

But... it's about time for Step-dad to come home. I glanced at the clock hanging on the wall. I guess I could go ahead and prepare his portion. I put some salad on a plate and warmed up the soup and curry. I wonder if Asamura-kun is going to eat dinner. Just from the preview, I can't figure anything out about the rest of his message... Maybe he said something about eating out?

I should just go ahead and prepare dinner for him either way, and leave him a note that says 'If it's too spicy, please use the soft-boiled egg in the fridge'. Once that was done, I headed to my room. I need to get some more studying done for tomorrow. I put on my headphones, focused on the music, and worked on my studies. The studies with which I haven't made much progress lately.

Not to mention that tomorrow are our parent-teacher meetings.

Chapter 7: 25th of September (Friday) – Asamura Yuuta

It's Friday, the day of the parent-teacher meetings for both Ayase-san and I. The morning began the same way as usual, with the both of us eating breakfast while sitting at the dining table. My old man was already reading the news on his tablet.

"Here, your miso soup."

"Oh, thanks a lot, Saki-chan."

He happily accepted the bowl, and the front door opened.

"I'm home~"

Akiko-san's voice reached us in the living room.

"Ah, welcome back, Akiko-san."

My old man was the first one to respond, shortly after followed by Ayase-san and I.

"Yes, I'm home, Taichi-san."

"Great work out there. Do you want breakfast?"

"I'll eat some. I went home directly so that I could get a bit more sleep later, which is why I haven't eaten anything yet."

"I see. Will you be able to get up after taking a nap, though?"

"I think so. Oh, right, I'd like to check the times once again, Yuuta-kun, Saki."

The two of us took out our phones, confirming the time slots we both had.

"My meeting is at 4:20 pm, and it lasts for twenty minutes."

“Mine’s right after. 4:40 pm to 5 pm. That’s not much time to move, but our classes are right next to each other, after all.”

While we explained that, Akiko-san also stared at her own phone, trying to remember the times we had just told her.

“Yup, it’s fine. Seems like I got it down.”

“But if we look at that schedule, you won’t get much sleep from now until then, no?”

“I’m planning on getting a taxi that will take me to your school, so I should be fine if I leave a bit before 4 pm. I’ll get up before that and take a shower, eat, brush my teeth, change into some fresh clothes, put on makeup... Yeah, if I get up at 2 pm, I should be fine.”

“It’s 7 am right now, so if you get to bed at 8, you can sleep for six hours... that’s less than usual, no?” My old man commented.

Considering that she usually sleeps until the evening, I guess this counts as a short sleep.

“I can always get some more sleep after coming home since I don’t have a shift tonight. The only problem is that neither of you two are home when it’s time to wake me up.” Akiko-san had made it clear that she sometimes has trouble getting up.

“Taichi-san, once it’s 2 pm, I expected a turbulent wake-up call!” Akiko-san put her hands together, smiling.

“You can’t trouble him while he’s at work, Mom.”

“Buuuuut!”

“Ahaha, it’s fine, just leave it to me, Akiko-san. My work isn’t so stressful that I can’t even do that, so it’s no problem.”

Akiko-san’s expression lit up, but Ayase-san only shrugged. Usually, my old man is a bit of a good-for-nothing, but at times like these he sounds so convincing and mature. Akiko-san seemed to have cheered up a lot, but that soon changed. She narrowed her eyebrows.

“But will this really be okay? Will I really be able to get up? Will the teachers think that I’m a weird mother...?”

“I don’t think anyone in the world would call you weird.”

“Y-You think so?” Akiko-san bashfully smiled after hearing what my old man said.

“Why yes, indeed.” He accepted her smile, and they both stared into each other’s eyes.

Both Ayase-san and I most likely were a bit perturbed by this flirty scene in front of us but we still reassured her that everything would be fine.

“Mom, if you’re going to eat breakfast, then sit down already. You’re just in the way if you stand there.”

“Yes yes, understood.”

“Are you still fine on time?” Ayase-san called out to my old man while glancing at the clock.

“Ah... you’re right, I should leave now. Thanks.” While seeing Akiko-san off who had headed to the bathroom to remove her makeup, my old man grabbed his bag and stood up. “Take care of Akiko-san, okay?”

Both Ayase-san and I nodded at the same time. Aren’t you the one with the biggest responsibility, though? Akiko-san came back, sat down at the table with us, and started eating her breakfast.

“Mom, what about lunch once you get up? I can freeze some of the curry for later. I think you’ll wake up just fine because of how spicy it is.”

“I’d rather not eat something too spicy before meeting your teachers, so I’ll just take the leftovers from this. Also, we still have another egg left, right?”

“Well... we do, but...”

“I’ll take care of myself, okay? You two should actually be heading to school right about now.”

Just as Akiko-san had said, it was about time for Ayase-san to leave the house.

“You don’t have to worry about cleaning up either, Yuuta-kun. I’ll take care of the dishes once I’m done eating.”

“Okay, thank you very much.”

As always, I waited a few minutes after Ayase-san left and then grabbed my bag.

“Alright, time to get a power nap in so that I can wake up in time!”

After leaving through the front door, I heard Akiko-san’s motivated voice behind me.

The chime rang, signaling the end of the 4th period. We’ll have parent-teacher meetings this afternoon, but I still have four hours left until it’s my turn. While eating lunch with Maru, I began thinking about how to spend that time.

“See you tomorrow, Asamura.”

“Yeah, catch you later!”

Maru finished eating before me as usual and stormed out of the classroom. In the end, he’s as passionate about his club as always. Now I was alone. In times like these, people of the go-home club like me have no other place to go. Most of the rooms were being used for the parent-teacher meetings after all. For a second, the library came to mind. As a book-lover, that is probably the place that you’d think of the fastest, but there’s a good chance, and it often happens, that the library doesn’t have the books I usually read. That’s why I usually never go there.

But this might be the perfect chance to go check it out. I grabbed my bag and headed for the library. The library here at Suisei is isolated from the main building. To one side of the school grounds, we had the ‘Library building’, which is a two-floor building, and there’s a

passageway leading from there to the main building. The first floor has all sorts of music rooms, and the second floor has the library room. You might think that we would call it the 'Music building', but there's some historical reason for it that I don't remember.

As I approached the library building, I heard the brass band club playing. The parent-teacher meetings at Suisei are held at once for all three years, which is why there are no afternoon classes for all of the students. This results in most clubs starting their activities earlier, which doesn't make it feel like a very advanced high school.

After climbing up the stairs, I opened the door to the library room. Taking one step inside, I was greeted by the scent of old books. It's a distinct scent I fondly remember from the old bookstore at Jimbōchō Station. A lot of people disdain this scent, which is why they go for newer releases, but I didn't mind it. It smells like the inherited knowledge of all of humanity.

The inside of the room wasn't nearly as cramped as back when exams were around the corner. When I glanced around, I saw that only one out of three tables was occupied. On a whim, I started thinking about how Ayase-san might be killing time right now. While that thought crossed my mind, I walked through the library and looked around, not spotting that girl I was thinking about. However, in her stead—

"Ohhhh? What's wrong?"

I was greeted by Narasaka Maaya.

"I mean, I was just trying to kill some time. I have my parent-teacher meeting today."

"Oh, Asamura-kun too?"

"I guess that makes two of us."

She beckoned me over, so I had no other choice but to sit down next to Narasaka-san. If we sat too far apart, we'd have to talk louder, which would bother the people around us. Luckily, only Narasaka-san was seated at the table, and there was a bookshelf between us and the rest of the room.

“When?”

“At 4:20 pm.”

“Oh, close. I’m the one before that, at 4 pm flat.”

I see, so she’s got the same amount of time to kill as me. Why isn’t she with Ayase-san, then? When I asked her about it, she said that Ayase-san had apparently gone home. With how much time we had, she could easily make it back in time. I guess I could have done the same.

But if she goes home now... I looked around for a clock to no avail, so I took out my smartphone. It’s still not even 1 pm... should I go home too? If I do... no, Ayase-san is home right now, so it’d just be awkward if I joined her... and it’s not even just her, Akiko-san is home right now, sleeping. But she should wake up soon. Just then, what Akiko-san had said this morning came back to mind.

‘The only problem will be if neither of you two are home when it’s time to wake me up.’

Did Ayase-san go home because...?

“What’s wrong, Asamura-kun? Are you lost in thought about something?”

“Ah, no, it’s nothing.”

If I go home now, I’ll just get in the way of Akiko-san’s few more minutes of sleep.

“Are you that worried about the parent-teacher meeting?”

“Not exactly, but—”

I was about to reveal my troubles. Maybe that was just a leading question on her part?

“More importantly, why didn’t you just go home for a bit as well, Narasaka-san?”

“Well, I thought I might as well take a break from taking care of my younger brothers for once.” She said and smiled.

According to her, her mother had taken the day off to attend the parent-teacher meeting, and is now taking care of her brothers while she’s at school.

“Sounds rough.”

“They’re all adorable, you know? Just, from time to time, I want to stretch out my wings. But forget about that.” Narasaka-san said. She put her cheek on the table and looked up at me. “Asamura-kun, do you like Saki?”

“No, I don’t.”

Maybe giving an immediate answer was a bad choice after all? Narasaka-san might seem like an airhead at times, but she can be oddly perceptive when it really matters.



“Really~?”

“You know, right? We’re siblings, so there’s no way.”

“But, you know...”

“I know what?”

“You still call her ‘Ayase-san’, right?”

My heart skipped a beat, even if I didn’t want it to. So that’s what she meant?

“You said that you’re siblings, but... you’re not related, right? And you became step-siblings just recently. You’re practically strangers. From how I see it, you two seem like two people who have feelings for each other~” It felt like she was explaining this to the desk rather than to me.

“That’s not it at all.”

“Hmm, maybe I looked too deeply into it.” She muttered something again, lounging against the desk.

Does that posture not hurt, ma’am? She suddenly pushed herself upwards, stretching her hands towards the ceiling while letting out a groan.

“I see~ So you’d be fine if I supported another boy?”

“Um...?”

“I mean, if there’s a boy who has feelings for Saki, then would you be okay with me supporting him in his attempts to win her over?”

The way she’s saying that makes it sound almost like there’s someone like that.

“I don’t think you would need to ask for my permission in order to do that.”

“Hmmm, really now?” Narasaka-san crossed her arms, and kept repeating the same “Hmmm” and “I see~” over and over.

I decided to leave her alone to her thoughts and went looking for a book to read. Since I still have more than three hours, I should be able to read two short ones. After a bit of searching, I spotted several older overseas paper books. There’s Storm’s *Immensee*, with 142 pages, and Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, with 148 pages. I think these two would be perfect for the amount of time I have available.

With these two books in hand, I returned to the table. Narasaka-san was gone, but since her bag was still there, she had probably just gone searching for books herself. I sat down and read for a while, and she suddenly sat down next to me when I looked up to take a break. We barely talked, simply reading our books in silence, as we sat next to each other.

“I’m going on ahead~”

The next time I looked up, Narasaka-san grabbed her bag and left the library room. It seems like it’s her turn now, huh? That means I have roughly twenty minutes left. I read the remaining pages in one go and got up myself. Just then, my smartphone, in silent mode, vibrated. Akiko-san sent me a LINE message. The first part said that she would be here soon, so I decided to pick her up at the front entrance. I returned the books and left the library building behind me.

At 4:10 pm, Akiko-san showed up at the front gate.

“Sorry for the wait, Yuuta-kun.”

“I just got here myself.”

In contrast to what she normally wore for work, my stepmother was now wearing a tight and professional suit. It consisted of a deep blue jacket and a U-neck shirt below that, and she had gone with indigo blue pants instead of her usual skirt. She had a two-toned handbag draped across her shoulder. I guess this is what you would call casual office attire. It’s not too stiff, but it’s also a bit formal. This was the first time I had seen Akiko-san in such an outfit. I offered her a pair of slippers that were prepared for the guardians who would be attending the parent-teacher meetings.

“Could you lead me there?” Akiko-san said while changing into said slippers.

“Of course, it’s over here.”

Mine and Ayase-san’s classrooms are on the second floor of the school building. I guided her to the stairs and led her there while giving

brief explanations about the school.

“So your class is right next to Saki’s, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Had you never met before you two became a family? If you’re this close all the time, I figured you would have run into each other at some point.”

“We most likely did, but...”

Considering that we were in the same group during P.E. class, we most likely bumped into each other several times. Maybe we even saw each other occasionally while walking down the hallways.

“...But I don’t remember.”

“My, what a gentleman. Not even a cute girl can steal your gaze.”

“That’s not really how it is. Not to mention that simply staring at someone can be seen as sexual harassment nowadays.”

“You’re too concerned about everything. Nobody would mind if there’s an ulterior motive involved.”

“And you can tell? With a single glance?”

“Of course.”

“How confident.”

She’s making it sound so simple, despite it being practically impossible to prove. This is one way in which she’s different from Ayase-san. Well, not letting people feel any responsibility despite her words and actions probably shows best what kind of person Akiko-san is, and the business she’s in. For a moment, I might actually believe her.

“It’s fine to be confident. If you’re wrong, a simple ‘I’m sorry’ will resolve everything.”

“Stubborn to the bone...”

I reprimanded myself for even believing her for a single second. For crying out loud... she's completely ruined her formal attire with that kind of attitude. But I don't particularly hate it. As expected, walking around school with someone who had been a stranger now turned stepmother feels pretty weird. At the same time, though, I felt relieved to see her act the same way as she does at home.

Whenever my real mother came to school with me, she'd act completely different than at home, like she had been switched out for someone else entirely. Honestly speaking, when I was in grade school, I thought she was eerie and horrifying. However, she probably had her own reasons for ending up that way but still considered the time, place, and occasion. That being said, I can't really trust people who change personality to that extent. I felt oddly relieved to see Akiko-san act the way she usually does.

“Ah, it's right here.”

“Okay, thank you, Yuuta-kun. I'll do my best.”

I don't really see what would urge her to work hard for a parent-teacher meeting, but whatever. I checked the time and knocked on the door. After the response from my homeroom teacher came, I opened the door.

“Please, have a seat.”

We were offered seats, so Akiko-san and I sat down at the table, facing my homeroom teacher. I had a parent-teacher meeting back in middle school, and also one in my first year at Suisei, so this wasn't exactly a first for me. However, I can't say I have much experience having my mother with me, so I can't help but feel nervous. With the future aspiration questionnaire as the initial subject, my homeroom teacher explained their own general view.

As a matter of fact, my homeroom teacher is actually a male teacher who doesn't have any particular features that make him stand out, and the fact that his name is as basic as 'Suzuki' doesn't make him much more memorable of a person. By the way, Ayase-san's

homeroom teacher is a female teacher with the equally common name ‘Satou.’

This came up as a topic when Ayase-san and I were discussing our parent-teacher meetings, and we actually burst out laughing when we found out that both of these were in the top three of the most common family names in Japan¹. It’s not statistically unlikely, but the chances were fairly low despite that.

“That being the case—” My homeroom teacher’s words brought me back to reality.

I’m not usually a big fan of hearing a teacher’s impressions about me, which is why I just let it flow one ear in and out through the other, but it seems like this is in regards to my future aspirations.

“If Yuuta-kun continues his efforts the way he has so far, there is a good chance that he might pass the entrance exam to a famous university within Tokyo.”

That positive evaluation genuinely surprised me. When I glanced to my side, I saw Akiko-san with relaxed cheeks. She must be happy, I bet. However, her expression froze up immediately after.

“This surely must be because of your thoughtful education—” Suzuki-sensei uttered some usual praise he’d make for parents, but he remembered too late that my father only recently married Akiko-san.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I picked up the ball.

“Yes, I am very thankful to her.”

I said these words with as much honesty as I could while making eye contact with my homeroom teacher, so I wasn’t able to check what kind of expression Akiko-san made. From the corner of my eye, though, I might have seen her eyes widen in shock. Suzuki-sensei faltered for a moment, but eventually continued with his previous statement, saying that if I continued studying the way I am now, I should be able to pass the entrance exam at any university I could wish for.

After giving our final farewells, Akiko-san and I left the classroom.

The next parent and child combo were already waiting outside. They passed us and closed the door behind them. It seems like we used up all the time we had available. Looking at the time, it was 4:38 pm. Only two minutes left.

“Ayase-san’s classroom is over here.”

“I have to hurry! And, thank you for just now, Yuuta-kun. I’m so happy that you’ve accepted me like that that I almost started crying.”

Because she told me these words with a bright smile, I felt my own heart warm up. This person is so happy because of a few words from me?

“I’m really happy!”

“H-Hey, don’t pull on my arm.”

I didn’t think she’d just hug me right then and there. And yet, I was surprised at myself the most, not disliking this comfortable sensation in the slightest. Even though I should only be ‘Asamura Taichi’s son’ in her eyes, I was forced to realize that she had accepted me as part of her family from the moment we met. I can’t remember the last time my real mother hugged me like this, if ever. At the very least, not after I was old enough to remember. But at least I can finally smile like this as a grown teenager. Yeah, I’m glad that my old man decided to marry this person.

After walking for a bit, we reached the next classroom, but nobody was seated in the chairs. I was confused for a bit, but then I saw Ayase-san walking over towards us from the direction of the shoe lockers. Akiko-san called out to her, walking over. Right as I passed the two of them as they were about to enter the classroom, Ayase-san turned towards me. For a second, I wasn’t sure what to say. Maybe I should say something?

“Good luck with the parent-teacher meeting.” These were the only words I could come up with in the heat of the moment.

“Yup. See you later, Nii-san.” She said and entered the classroom with Akiko-san.

Now then—Since all my plans for today ended, and since I don't have a shift at work...

"I guess I'll go home and relax a bit."

I started making my way towards the shoe lockers, but right as I passed around the corner, someone called out to me when I reached the stairs. I raised my head. It was a boy wearing tennis clothes and with a tennis racket in hand.

"You're Asamura-kun, right?"

"...Yeah?"

Who was he? I feel like I've seen his face before.

"You don't remember? It's me, Shinjou Keisuke."

When I heard his name, I finally remembered him.

"Ah, from last summer."

"Yep. yep."

He's one of the people who went with us to the pool, one of Ayase-san and Narasaka-san's classmates. Thanks to Narasaka-san's special introduction back then, I immediately remembered him as soon as I heard the name.

"First up, let me apologize. I didn't mean to eavesdrop or anything."

"Huh?" I tilted my head, confused.

"It's actually my turn to go to the parent-teacher meeting next, which is why I left club activities a few minutes ago. Then, when I came here—"

Ahh, is this what I think it is?

"The woman, who I'm assuming is your mother, left the meeting with you, and now is going with Ayase-san to hers... What exactly does that mean?"

For a moment, I found myself unwilling to tell him. But then I remembered Akiko-san's overjoyed smile just earlier. I really shouldn't deny it here, huh?

"We're siblings. Though we're not that open about it."

"Huh? But, your name is Asamura, and she's..."

He was probably wondering why our family names were different.

"Our parents remarried."

"So, basically...?"

"This happened recently. That's why, in simple terms, Ayase-san is my younger step-sister." The moment I finished those words, a bitter taste filled my mouth.

"I see, I totally thought you were—"

Were what, exactly?

"Anyway, I have to go."

On my way home, while I was pedaling my bike, I pondered it all. On one hand, I felt the warmth of Akiko-san's smile fill my chest, and on the other hand, I still had a bitter taste in my mouth from admitting that Ayase-san is my younger sister. I pondered about the two of them for a while after that.

1 Fact checked, is true

Chapter 8: 25th of September (Friday) – Ayase Saki

I ran into Maaya by the shoe lockers.

“Saki~ I’m leaving early~ Saki-you later!”

“...What are you even talking about? So are you on your way home?”

“Yup, although I’m not going straight home. I want to enjoy my freedom a bit longer~”

Oh yeah, she mentioned that she didn’t have to take care of her younger brothers today, which was why she didn’t go home with her parents after the parent-teacher meeting.

“So you’re done with your meeting, huh?”

“Yours is up next, yeah? Is your mom here already?”

“Should be. She’s taking care of Asamura-kun’s meeting as well.”
When I finished my sentence, Maaya made a somewhat complicated expression.

“Ah, that reminds me, I ran into Asamura-kun in the library.”

“Really?”

So he was waiting there for his meeting to start. He really loves books, all right.

“Yup. He reads so fast, too. I barely finished half of my book, and he almost finished two whole books. He reads at the speed of light!”

So you mean he’s reading at 300,000km/s, huh? That doesn’t make any sense. I made a wry smile and just nodded along.

“He’s amazing.”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it.”

Even though I knew that Maaya was saying it lightly, hearing her praise Asamura-kun to such a degree was close to making me happy. Keeping my lips from curling upwards took a lot of effort on my part.

“Anyway, I’ll get going now. Your meeting is starting soon, no?”

I checked the time. Indeed, there were only five more minutes left.

“See you~ bye bye~”

“Yeah, see you.” I split up with Maaya and hurried towards the classroom.

I had gone home thinking I had more than enough time, but it would be awfully embarrassing if I ended up late despite all of that. Not to mention that there would be no point in waking Mom up only to be late myself. I rushed up the stairs, turned the corner, and right then, I saw Asamura-kun and Mom walking out of the classroom. They seemed to be talking about something, but I was too far away to pick up any part of the conversation. All I knew was that Mom looked really happy, which also made me feel joyful inside.

Whenever she shows that kind of face, she really feels delighted from the bottom of her heart. When I was accepted to Suisei, she made a similar expression. Asamura-kun truly is amazing. I’m so glad he’s the one who became my older brother—But hold on, why is Mom suddenly embracing Asamura-kun like that? Even if you’re a parent and child, you shouldn’t overdo it with the excessive skinship, right? I panicked for a bit, but then I remembered that Mom is the type of person who’d immediately hug me about everything as well. Well, we’re mother and daughter, so this much is normal... maybe. She noticed that I had arrived and jogged over towards me. There was a poster right next to us that read ‘Don’t run in the hallways!’ but that’s how we were reunited anyway.

Right after the meeting began, my teacher Satou-sensei began explaining something before we even got to the questionnaire.

“If I may be so honest, the first time we saw her, we were a bit

worried about your daughter Saki-san.” Satou-sensei is the type of teacher who speaks pretty frankly, and she very clearly stated that she was worried about my appearance and the rumors surrounding me.

Rather than beating around the bush, I prefer people who get right to the point. However, I wonder how Mom feels about this? While listening to the teacher’s explanation, I glanced over at her. She sat still with a straight back, listening to every word Satou-sensei said.

“However—I changed my opinion in regards to that.” I subconsciously raised my head, looking at my teacher. “Recently, her grades in Japanese, which she previously had trouble with, have gone up, and those concerning rumors have subsided as well. Regarding her fashion, I do have to reprimand her, but I also understand the desire to dress up.”

Mom nodded in an exaggerated manner.

“I’d like her to still enjoy her time as a high school student, so I would be happy if you could watch over her as her mother.”

“I will look after her with everything I have.” She declared with a confident tone, and then went silent once more.

Satou-sensei looked at Mom’s eyes for a moment, nodded, and then opened up the future aspiration questionnaire I filled out.

“Then I’d like to talk about Saki-san’s choice of university.”

Taking the grades from the first term into consideration, and depending on my grades improving in Japanese, Satou-sensei said that if I keep working hard as I have so far, I might be able to get into the university of my choice. She even offered names for universities every student in Japan knew.

“I will leave that choice to my daughter.” Mom said and sent me a gaze like she wanted me to take over the conversation.

Satou-sensei also directed her eyes at me. It made me feel a bit tense.

“I... want to attend a university with the cheapest possible study

costs, and one that prioritizes finding a job.”

Mom looked at me with a ‘Are you sure about that?’ sort of gaze, but this is something I can’t back down from. Sure, I might have been able to secure myself a spot in a research facility or something resembling that, but I don’t particularly have anything I really want to do right now. If so, then I shouldn’t go to an expensive university, which would only put more pressure on Mom. However, thinking about my future employment, just picking a random university won’t do, either.

“Then...” Satou-sensei gently tapped one end of her pen on the desk and continued. “How about Tsukinomiya Women’s University?”

“Tsukinomiya?”

It’s a rather famous women’s university inside of the Tokyo metropolitan area. Basically everyone knows its name, and I thought that it sounded a bit heavy.

“If you keep up your current grades, you should be able to make it in. They keep strong ties with graduates, they prioritize employment over everything, and since it’s a national university, the student fees are pretty manageable. They have scholarships that are fully paid by the government, and they also have some interest-free student loan options. I think it would be a perfect fit for you.”

“Huh... I never thought about that.”

I didn’t expect her to bring up Tsukinomiya. However, she flashed me a faint smile, mentioning that they will be having an open campus this Saturday.

“An open campus...”

“Maybe it would be a good idea for you to find out what a university is like.”

“You’re... right.”

If it’s Saturday, then I might be able to make it.

‘That’s why you force yourself to walk forward!’

Maaya’s words repeated inside my head like an endless march. Doing something new and throwing yourself into it. In order to forget these feelings I have for Asamura-kun, and also to make something good out of my life. It’s tomorrow. I really should check out that open campus. The parent-teacher meeting ended, and I walked out of the classroom. That was when I decided.

“If anything, if she keeps her moderation in check too much, she’ll just end up exploding...”

On the way out, Mom was muttering something, but I decided to ignore it.

Chapter 9: 26th of September (Saturday) – Ayase Saki

Tsukinomiya Women's University is right along the Yamanote Line. From the Shibuya train station, you go north of the Yamanote Line (in the eyes of the Yamanote Line, it's probably outside), and then go down at Ikebukuro station. Two more stops on the private railroad, and a bit more of a walk along the street, and you reach the front gate.

“So big...”

The first impression that fell upon me was the sheer size of the campus. Just how many buildings fit inside the inner walls of the overall area? Even though it's inside the city center, they somehow managed to secure a huge campus. Just as you would expect from a national university that has a long history. The stone-paved path leading inside the front gate was decorated with tall trees to the left and right, as well as rectangular buildings that looked like they were competing with each other. According to the map I had on my phone, many of these buildings to the left and right were grade schools and high schools adjacent to the university. A little ways off in the distance is the middle school as well.

I was at a loss for words. I never would have imagined that they had everything from grade school all the way up to a university in the same place. Swept along by the crowd of people standing at the entrance, I made my way towards the university. Today was Saturday, so there shouldn't be any classes. In other words, this crowd of people are all here for the open campus...?

Right after entering through the front gate, a mature woman wearing a t-shirt handed me the program of the day. It seems like they're some kind of staff. Well, it wouldn't help much if only students came here for this event today. When I looked around, amidst the people walking with me, I also saw girls older than me, and even seniors. They must either be students who attend here or faculty.

In the distance, I could hear energetic voices, probably from the various sports clubs, and I saw shadows behind the windows of the main building. I guess there's no real day off at a university, huh? Does everyone just diligently attend university every single day? I can't see that happening, honestly.

Walking along the stone-paved path, I moved deeper into the campus. The faculty of humanities I'm interested in is located fairly deep inside, and I have to walk around the giant building ahead of me. As I made my way around the rectangular building, I spotted a courtyard to the right side of me, a bit elevated above my path.

That green grass is such a treat for the eyes... Except for somebody sleeping on top of it. To my surprise, a woman wearing a white lab coat was comfortably sleeping on the grass like it was her own bed. Hey, are you serious? Ah, someone went over... and now she's getting scolded. I mean, what did you expect? Even if the sun feels comfortable right now, you can't just do that. I guess some people like taking breathers at their own leisure, although she took it a bit too far. I guess you can encounter a lot of different types of people at a university.

I looked at the sign of the building in front of me. Yep, this should be it. Though I have to say, the second I entered the building, for some reason it seemed like somebody called out my name. However, that should be impossible. I don't know anybody at this university.

"Saki-chaaaaan! Whaaaaa! You came to my university?!"

...*What?*

"Yomiuri-san?"

It turned out to be my senior at work—Yomiuri Shiori-san. Not to mention that she was seated at the reception desk. So wait, does this mean...?

"You're a student at this university?"

"Yup. That's maybe the long and short of it!"

'Maybe'? Are you not sure? When I looked around, the reception for

every single faculty was different, and she was coincidentally seated at the one for the humanities.

“If you told me you were coming, I would have prepared some refreshments for you.”

“It was a sudden decision.”

Also, I didn’t even know that she was a student at this university. Nor do I have any way of contacting her.

“I see~ So, you came here to check out the example lecture?”

“...Yes, I might as well.”

I made a bit of space to not get in the way of the people after me and briefly responded. In reality, I had just planned to check out whichever lecture sounded interesting enough, but I don’t think there’s any need for me to say that here. Not to mention that I have no reason not to check out the lecture from the faculty the wise Yomiuri-san studies under.

“All right. There’s still some time left, so let me show you around.”

“Are you sure?”

I looked at the reception desk again. There was actually another girl sitting next to Yomiuri-san, handing out flyers to people as they arrived. She saw that I had yet to get a flyer and quickly handed me one. It seemed to show the details for today’s lecture.

“Shiori~ If you’re not going to do your work, then at least get out of the way. Over there, over there.”

“Yep! Absolute gratitude. Come on, let me show you around.”

“But...”

“Oh, Yomiuri-kun, is that a friend of yours?”

I turned towards the source of yet another new voice and was greeted by the sight of a woman who was evidently not an average student at

this university. She must be a teacher. She looked to be in her later twenties, or maybe early thirties. If she's a teacher here, then she probably is a bit older, but that's just an estimation from her looks. She was wearing a light purple suit, emitting a mature atmosphere, but thanks to a lack of sleep or something along those lines, she had large bags under her eyes, which harmed her innate beauty—

Wait, I've seen her before somewhere. In my head, I pictured her wearing a white coat above that suit.

“Ah.”

She's the person who was sleeping on the grass a few minutes ago.

“Hm?”

“Oh, Saki-chan, you know her?”

“W-Well, just earlier, on the grass...”

I couldn't finish my sentence. However, Yomiuri-san seemed to guess what I meant to say from that alone.



“Kudou-sensei... did you do it again? You bought an expensive brand-name suit for the outside visitors, right? Your suit will cry if you get it dirty like that...”

“I was wearing a coat above my suit.”

“That’s not the problem here.”

“It depends on each person’s own definition of a problem. During our short lives, it would be a waste to treat clothes with an expensive tag on them as anything other than simple clothes to wear. More importantly, Yomiuri-kun, tell me more about this good-looking individual here.”

Yomiuri-san seemed like she had another complaint or two, but she finally made a resigned face and introduced me.

“...She’s Ayase Saki-chan, a junior at my part-time job.”

“My name is Ayase. Um, nice to meet you.” I made a polite bow, and the woman in a suit muttered an ominous ‘Hm, perfect timing’.

Excuse me, what might she be talking about?

“Nice to meet you, Saki-chan. I’m Kudou Eiha. I’m an associate professor at this university, researching ethics and moral philosophy as a whole. If I may ask, you seem to be a high school student?”

“Yes... I’m in my second year in high school.”

Very good. Quite wonderful indeed. What a lucky strike. There’s something very important I’d like to talk about with you, so please listen carefully.” She kept talking without pausing for breath.

Just from that, I understood that she’s clever. As expected of a university professor, you could say.

“Yes, what is it?”

“How many people have you done it with so far?”

“What?”

For a moment, I failed to grasp what I was just asked. Did what with... whom exactly? Eh, wait, **that** kind of stuff?

“Um, I’m sorry, I can’t quite follow—”

I totally understood what she was talking about, although I really didn’t want to.

“Professor! What are you asking a minor during your first meeting?!”
As if to protect me, Yomiuri-san stood between me and Professor Kudou and started giving her a verbal lashing.

“Huh?”

“This isn’t something you should be asking here in public.”

“Hmmm? I mean, I am very much aware of that. That is why I was being considerate and used vague vocabulary instead. Hmm. Though maybe that isn’t something too secretive in the first place. To all of humanity, it is a natural and average phenomenon. I guess bringing it up broadly would be... You know, the act of hiding something gives it a much stronger and emphasized impression, much more so than bringing it up openly... So in other words, how many men—of course, women are fine too—have you had sexual intercourse with?”

“Professor.”

“Hm? Why are you making such a scary face? Unlike me, Yomiuri-kun, you are not treated as a sleep-deprived vampire, so preserve that beauty you have. Listen carefully. I rarely get such a vital chance to talk with an active high school girl, so this is all precious data for my research.”

“You need her consent before treating her like a test subject. There’s no way I should have to remind a professor in this faculty about that, no?”

For a moment, Professor Kudou’s eyes opened wide, and she flashed a smile.

“Huh, you’re showing your fangs quite actively today, Yomiuri-kun. Great argument.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Indeed, you’re correct. So, Saki-chan... or should I call you Ayase-kun?”

“Ah, I’m fine with whichever...”

“Saki-chan it is, then. That’s a lot cuter at least.”

She even said that with a straight face. What a weird person. Maybe all university professors are like this?

“You see, I mostly focus on male-female relationships, as familial relationships, doing ethical and moral research.”

“Familial relationships...?”

“Indeed. Speaking of ethics in terms of the dictionary explanation, it’s order and discipline amidst morals and human life... In other words, a social norm. I am researching these.”

“You can research something like that?”

“Why of course. Listen carefully. Society itself is composed of several ethics. What would be preferred for you to do, what you are not allowed to do—even taboos. But this might not be something that stays the same for all eternity. If I were to give an example... consider the idea that close-relatives like brother and sister are not allowed to love each other.”

I knew I shouldn’t react just because of a topic that involves me, but I could clearly feel my expression tensing up.

“Ethics and morals are not a science. At the very least, they are not created to be one.”

“Similar to the reason it was created, but every research needs some kind of science.”

“Well, this isn’t part of the main discussion right now, so we can argue about that all we want at another time, Yomiuri-kun. What’s important right now is that ethics and morals are important for living beings, which makes them subject to perpetual change as time progresses. However, the change of what is necessary for society and the change of awareness towards such is always out of sync, and as a result, our society—”

Kudou-sensei paused and looked around for a moment, realizing that she had gotten a bit too passionate.

“Hm. You... Saki-chan, if you have some time after this, would you mind coming to my office?”

“There she goes again, hitting on people.” Yomiuri-san sighed in disbelief.

Professor Kudou skillfully ignored that comment and continued.

“Saki-chan... you are troubled about something right now, no?”

My body froze up.

“I might be able to give you the answer to that, you know?”

“Wha, um...”

Honestly, I felt slightly curious about her answer. If it's someone as clever as her, an associate professor at a renowned university, she might be able to direct me in the right direction.

“Just for a bit should be fine.”

“Then it's decided, then. Follow me.”

“Kudou-sensei is trying to do bad things to you!” Yomiuri-san said, trying to follow us.

“Hey hey, we're on an open campus. You can't just walk away from your spot,” Professor Kudou reprimanded her.

“Excuse me, but I was the one who offered to show Saki-chan around, and I have permission from every—”

“The deadline of your report is in three days, no?”

“Urk.”

“You have yet to finish it, I imagine.”

“Well...”

“It's fine. I'll return her on time. But until then, I'll borrow her. Over here, Saki-chan, follow me. You must be curious what a research

office at a university looks like.” With these words, the ethics associate professor Kudou Eiha started walking, and I found myself following her.

“Which do you prefer, coffee or black tea?”

“Ah, tea please.” I responded and looked around the room I had been taken to.

It was roughly 13 square meters in size, but it barely felt like 7 and a half. This feeling was created through the sheer number of books scattered everywhere. It wasn’t just the steel shelf against the wall. Every single desk was covered with books, and towers of books filled the floor here and there, and you had to navigate through all of these in order to reach the desk in the back. There was only a small amount of clear space just around said desk.

In front of the desk was a low table, with two sofas facing each other on both sides. This must be a space for when she received visitors of sorts. Kudou-sensei urged me to take a seat as she turned on the electric kettle, taking out a teapot and two cups. She then opened up the can of tea.

“Are you okay with Nilgiri tea?”

“Ah, yes, anything is—Wait, are you sure? It’s Nilgiri tea.”

“Ohh, so you know about it?”

“...I have heard of it.”

“Tell me what you know.”

It became evident that she really was a teacher. But at the same time, I realized that the way she spoke wasn’t like an average teacher either. Most of the ones I know will ask a question that they can answer with ‘Correct’. But that’s not what she was asking for. Instead, she wanted to see if I could convey what I knew using my own words.

“It’s a general term for the tea leaves which are harvested in Southern India. The common term is ‘Blue Mountain Black Tea’.”

“Ohh, how well-informed.”

“It’s easy to find online, after all.”

“Have you ever tried it?”

“Never.”

Just like Blue Mountain Coffee, Blue Mountain Black Tea is supposed to be rather expensive. Back when just Mom and I lived together, we had to live off simple tea bag boxes with 50 teabags, which cost 500 yen (meaning that one cup cost us 10 yen), and I was already happy with just that, so I only possessed the knowledge about it, but had no experience tasting it.

“Then this will be your **first time**.”

She pronounces specialized vocabulary so viciously. With a clicking sound, the electric kettle turned off. She let the water boil for a moment and then poured a small amount into the pot, warming it up. Then she clicked the switch again, boiling the water. She moved over to the pot, pouring the water into a cup until it was empty, and then quickly added the tea leaves to the pot, poured the hot water inside, and closed the lid. After that was done, she flipped over the hourglass on the table.

“Some book would probably say that you can’t let the boiling water get cold, so you shouldn’t move the electric kettle away from the fire of the burner, or pour the water into the pot. Sadly, this room doesn’t have such a gas burner. The temperature might be lower than what you’re used to, but please put up with it.”

“I’m fine.”

If anything, if you had a gas burner, would you have brought an old-school kettle with you?

“You see, a friend of mine who went to India sent me this tea.”

“Traveling?”

“Fieldwork.”

“So as a job?”

“No, as research. She is a researcher.”

“I don’t really understand the difference. If being a researcher is a profession, isn’t doing research your job?”

“Ahh, I see. In the eyes of the world, it would boil down to that, yes. It’s the same for me, but my conscious perception of this being a job is fairly weak.”

“Really? Then, well, what are you doing?”

“Living.”

“Excuse me?”

“At the very least, the only thing I am doing is being alive. A researcher is just a living being.”

“...I don’t quite understand the difference.”

“It figures. There are not many people who do, which makes explaining it a hard piece of work.” She finished soaking the tea. She emptied the cups and poured the tea into them.

White steam carried a distinct scent into the air, tickling my nose.

“Sadly, I can’t offer you any snacks today. Normally I would have something, but I just ran out, so—”

“No, it’s fine. Thank you very much.”

“Well, we don’t exactly have much time until the trial lecture.”

We sat down on the sofas, facing each other, and sipped the tea. When I grabbed the cup with both my hands and let the red liquid run down my throat, it warmed my body from the inside while the cold air of the A/C blew against me. Feeling warmth, especially around my stomach, I let out a comfortable breath.

“I actually heard about you from Yomiuri-kun.”

“About me?”

“Or more accurately, about you two. Your... what was his name again?”

“Are you talking about Asamura-kun?”

“I see, so his name is Asamura-kun.”

“...You didn't know, did you?”

“Good guess.” She said with no shame whatsoever.

So everything just now was just her pretending to forget his name so that I would give it to her. And I totally fell for it.

“I didn't know his name. I just heard about an interesting fellow working with Yomiuri-kun at her part-time job. I think it was last summer. From then on, she started talking about you two, but she never told me any names. She might not look like it, but Yomiuri-kun is actually quite protective of personal information.”

“Might not look like it... To me, Yomiuri-senpai looks like someone with actual morals.”

“Ohh, you call her Senpai, I see. What a strong personality. You're already acting like you've been accepted to this university.”

“...Yomiuri-san.” I immediately fixed my previous statement.

She must know that Yomiuri-san is my senior at work, yet she's still teasing me about this.

“Haha, there's no need to force yourself. I just felt like joking at your expense. Though I have to say, you two are much more intriguing than I would have expected.”

“Have you met Asamura-kun before?”

“Nay, would be my answer. However, Yomiuri-kun seems to be enjoying herself with you two around, and because you are quite the intriguing individual, I am certain that he must be equal to you in

that regard. I'd love to talk with this Asamura-kun."

The shape of my mouth turned into a ^, showing clear disinterest. I found myself not wanting Asamura-kun to meet his person.

"So, let's get to the main topic at hand."

"Main topic...?"

Professor Kudou made an exaggeratedly surprised expression.

"What are you saying? I told you that I might be able to assist in your troubles."

"Ah, right."

Now that she mentioned it, it had completely slipped my mind.

"Let me get straight to the point. You are most likely in love with this Asamura-kun person, no? However, in connection to common morals and ethics, he is also someone you definitely shouldn't fall in love with."

"Why would you think that?"

"Judging from your way of phrasing that, I seem to be on the right track."

"...I really can't stand you."

"Ha ha ha, I like honest people like you." Professor Kudou smiled and continued. "You see, judging from the information I had from your part-time work, my fantasies have been running wild. You clearly are interested in each other, yet you try to keep a certain level of distance between the two of you. Why is that? It's because you are in conflict with a taboo. For example, being step-siblings."

She really couldn't be more frank. I'm awful when it comes to high-speed straight balls like these.

"You even concluded that we're step-siblings."

“If you were related by blood, then I wouldn’t have judged it as something worth agonizing over... So you like Asamura-kun, yes?”

“...Well, I do think he is a great older brother.”

“I didn’t mean ‘like’ in that sense. I am asking if you have romantic feelings for him.”

“...He’s my older brother, you know?”

“Basically unrelated.”

“Even if it’s not by blood, he’s my brother.”

“Which he became three months ago.”

She even has the exact time frame down to a T. The way she perfectly connects the small dots of information to obtain the bigger picture really makes her a troublesome person to deal with.

“But he’s family. There’s no way I would feel that way. Mom is happy that he relies on her. She must treasure him as the child of Step-dad, whom she loves very much.”

“Circumstances of the people around you don’t matter, Saki-chan. How do **you** feel?”

“I...”

I hesitated. Should I really tell a professor this suspicious? Not to mention that she’s Yomiuri-san’s professor as well. If I were to carelessly blurt out something, Yomiuri-san might find out... and even though I felt this way, in the end—

“I don’t really understand it myself. But I’m always conscious of him...”

Before I realized it myself, I already started explaining the change I had experienced over the past three months. After I finished telling her everything, I took a sip of tea. The cold tea now tasted even more bitter than before.

"I'm unsure if these really are romantic feelings..." I said.

"Hm, I understand." Professor Kudou leaned backwards against the sofa, raising her chin, and closed her eyes.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest and started thinking. Only the index finger of her right hand tapped up and down in a rhythm.

"Hm." She opened her eyes and looked outside the window. "Seems to be a mistaken idea." She muttered.

...Eh?

"What do you mean by that?"

"What if those aren't actually romantic feelings?"

"That—"

That should be impossible. Can these feelings that make my chest tighten up be a mistake?

"Well, there's no need to rush things. You should think about it at your own pace." Professor Kudou relaxed her arms and raised her right index finger.

And then she started profiling me.

The first thing Professor Kudou pointed out was about my outer appearance and the reason I acted the way I did.

"You're wearing your uniform today?"

"The school told me to do so."

Suisei might be fairly loose with their regulations, but when it comes to the open campus of a high-level employment-focused university, I should keep my dress code in check. In other words, they urged me to go with either a suit or my uniform, and since I don't have any suit, I went with my usual uniform.

"I heard about your usual appearance from Yomiuri-kun. How do I

say this... they are clothes with fierce fighting strength, yes?”

“I would say so.”

So my concept of fashion being fighting strength is something she understands? Even Maaya sometimes struggles to follow my argument. Well, she’s the type of person who enjoys dressing up her younger brothers.

“Though I don’t know if that acts as a two-hit attack or an area of effect attack.”

“Is that kind of joke popular right now?”

I feel like Asamura-kun said something similar.

“Well, no need to fixate on that. In the greater majority of eyes, it looks like you’re playing around with fashion.”

Professor Kudou’s argument led me to remember what Satou-sensei said yesterday. She said that I was worried because of my flashy clothes. Well, I know that the people around me tend to think I’m always playing around somewhere in Shibuya. It’s too much of a pain to argue about it every single time, though, so I try to avoid that.

“However, that stylishness is just an act, right?”

“An act?”

“In the sense that you most likely are trying to show off your own fashion sense to the people around you.”

“Ahhh...”

She might be right about that. At the very least, I had no intention of hiding that. Good at studying, but not stylish at all—Looking cute but empty on the inside—I didn’t want to hear either of those statements. I didn’t want to lose on either front. I think I mentioned this to Asamura-kun once. I do respect my mother for raising me as she did, but considering her looks and academic records, people oftentimes perceive her as a person who has no business being respected. I just wanted to shut up all of those people.

“So your outer appearance has been consciously crafted to be this way.”

“That’s about right.”

“As for how you act deep down... You’re still in your second year of high school, yet you came to the open campus of a national-level university, which means you must be a diligent person.”

“I was recommended to do so at a recent parent-teacher meeting, yes.”

“No no no. That’s not what I meant. Your character who shows off their outer appearance wouldn’t come here even if your teacher at school recommended it to you.”

Really? I feel like... something is different there.

“That’s not the case.”

When I protested, Professor Kudou swallowed her breath, and showed an expression like she was enjoying herself.

“Then please, demonstrate your counterargument.”

“I don’t want to act as the ‘Girl who is playing around’. I don’t want to play up the fact that I like to play around. I simply want to show the people around me that it’s possible to accomplish being ‘Cute’ or ‘Beautiful’ with my outer appearance.”

Just like Mom does.

“Oh? And so?”

“The reason I came here isn’t that I am a diligent person, but rather to display that I am clever. It’s part of that.”

“You meant to announce this to the people around you, which is why you came here for the open campus?”

“Not exactly. I wouldn’t do that. However, I thought that I might improve my own life by coming here. I wanted to prove that to

myself more than anything. Even if I were to slack off doing something, there's no guarantee that somebody else might witness it, but I myself am always watching my own actions."

Professor Kudou closely inspected my expression, listening to my statement in silence. I felt like I would lose in some fashion if I looked away, so I kept a stern gaze glued to her. After a bit of time passed, we both eventually averted our gazes. Professor Kudou gulped down the rest of her tea and got up.

"I see, so this contradiction of an outer appearance and the inner workings are both created through your own desire. But you could also put it in a different way."

"Do tell."

"You're the type of person who doesn't want to show all of her weaknesses to other people, no?"

My eyes opened wide.

"Hear me out. You said something crucial right now. Your actions on the outside and your actions on the inside both follow the same principle. The key point, in this case, is that you don't want to lose."

I stayed quiet, simply listening to what she had to say.

"You are basically fighting 24/7. Not to mention all on your own. When you're outside, and even in your supposed oasis, which you would call your home. You never show any weakness so that you don't lose. However, this type of person is usually starving for affection and recognition, and immediately becomes attached when shown the smallest amount of support."

"Attached...?"

Inside my head, I envisioned a dog wagging its tail as it ran towards its owner—What am I, some kind of puppy? Also, I will just ignore the fact that the owner in my vision was actually Asamura-kun.

"When conducting this research, you often encounter cases like these."

“What kind of cases?”

“Step-siblings, or step-parents with step-children. Basically strangers who are suddenly forced to live together. When people who are starving for recognition from the opposite sex suddenly start living together with someone like that, and they have more chances to interact with them, it makes it much easier to develop romantic feelings.”

...So I'm one of those cases? For a moment, my mind was seething, but I took a deep breath to calm myself down.

“Objection.”

“Please.”

“Following that logic, recognition from the opposite sex should be regarded as essential to one's growth, and when that is missing, more than any natural desire, you immediately develop special feelings for someone from the opposite sex just from the smallest things—is that what you're trying to say?”

“Is there anything wrong with that?” She urged me to continue.

“Is that kind of preconception even correct? If not, then this logic is improper for our modern day and age. It would utterly deny the existence of same-sex marriage or single mothers and fathers. Looking at it from a historical point of view, there is no guarantee that a boy or girl will be raised in a place with members of the opposite sex close to them.”

“For example?”

“There is the saying that goes ‘after age 7, boys and girls should be kept apart,’ no?”

“Yeah, I know that. Although it is fairly outdated.”

“However, that is how things were handled a long time ago. That is why certain locations like a girls' high school with an all-girls dormitory—or a women's university—still exist.”

“Oho.”

I think I got one attack through to her.

“By the logic you are following, the people raised in these kinds of environments would immediately catch romantic feelings for the opposite sex simply from the smallest connections and interactions, yes?”

“Yep, yep. And?”

She sure looks like she’s having fun.

“You mentioned it before, but I’d like to see the results of your research and whom you are evidently using as your basis. If not for that, simply thinking about it is pointless. And that would also deny the environment I personally grew up in.”

Saying that I became an easy woman simply because my mother did her best to raise me all on her own is something I will not accept in silence.

“What if your instincts as a living being limited your reasoning power?”

“If anything, I believe that our ability to reason exists to adjust our instincts to society’s standards.”

“I see. That kind of viewpoint is definitely plausible. And?”

“Without the grounds of the idea that one’s romantic feelings can be made unstable simply because of a lack of contact with the opposite sex during one’s growth, it would turn all of this into a singular claim. At the same time, it would simply change said claim into the old-fashioned societal standard that children need both parents. I cannot agree with that.”

“So you are saying that modern societal standards are different?”

“I would like to believe that to be the case.”

“Simple belief doesn’t resolve anything.”

“However, even if every living being were to have some kind of essential environment, I believe that relying on this to control one’s instincts would defeat the purpose behind reasoning and intelligence. If this were realized, the standards of society ought to change, and the blind appliance of conventional morals—allowing someone to scream idle and thoughtless complaints like ‘Your child needs a father’—is worthless. I think.” I spoke with a challenging tone, and Professor Kudou, who stood behind the sofa, arms leaning forwards, nodded.

“Thinking about these sorts of arguments is what we do—in ethics and moral philosophy.”

...! I felt all strength vanish from my body. So that’s what this is.

“You can keep showing evidence and proving the grounds to your argument as much as you want. For example, biology or psychology thesis papers are bound to have mountains of research that support the hypothesis—However, this is nothing but a trend or a tendency, and most certainly not does not point at an answer that will aid your conclusion. The problem you have in your heart is something only you yourself can resolve.”

“It feels like you’ve made me dance on your palm.”

I sank back into the sofa, feeling like a jellyfish on land. I could only look up at the ceiling and sigh.

“So Yomiuri-senpai goes through this kind of thing every single day...”

Professor Kudou returned to the sofa, sitting down herself—far enough to create wrinkles in her new brand suit—but she said ‘Not exactly’.

“Maybe twice or thrice a week.”

“...That’s still too often.”

I feel exhausted. Really, really exhausted. To the point that I’d rather not do this again.

“Are you not exhausted, Professor?”

“I wonder. I can’t tell, honestly. I’m bad at not thinking about things. I think about these points all the time. All the time, unless I’m sleeping... but sometimes even in my dreams.”

“Shouldn’t you take a break?”

“I can’t take a break. I attempted it several times, but I just couldn’t. The only time my thoughts will stop is when I die for good.”

She’s like a fish who will die if it can’t swim. I see. So that’s what she meant when she said she was simply living as a researcher. It all finally made sense.

“Well, before getting into another dispute, this is just some well-meant advice.”

“Yes?”

“You assume that you like this Asamura Whatsit, but when have you ever even shared a close relationship with another man aside from him?”

“Urk... Well.”

The only male besides Asamura-kun that I know was my father when I was a young child, although I only have faint memories of him. There’s also what little I know of Step-dad from these past three months.

“There coincidentally happened to be only one member of the opposite sex in your immediate vicinity, so you happened to fall in love with him. Can you confidently say that this isn’t true? Well, I apologize for the harsh way of phrasing that question.” Professor Kudou said.

Considering our entire previous exchange, I was surprised to hear her actually apologize right at the very end.

“Even if you tell me that... I can’t say for certain.”

“If so, then maybe it would be best for you to interact with many more people, considering how young you are. There’s a chance you find another charming boy that you end up interested in, and you’ll forget about all your worries.”

“With other people...”

“You don’t have to get a lover or anything like that. I used the word ‘interact.’ Narrowness of view is the enemy of your intelligence and ability to reason.”

“That is true... I agree.”

“You could also just ignore everything I said as well. Treat it not as the words of a moral philosophy professor, but from a senior and more experienced person in life.” She continued. “However, in the event that you interact with another interesting boy, and your own feelings still don’t change despite that, then make sure to treasure whatever feelings you end up with.” She gave me these final words, stood up from the sofa, and offered me her hand.

When I glanced over at the clock on the wall, I saw that it was almost time for the lecture. I gratefully accepted her hand.

“That’s right. It’s important to be honest at times, Saki-chan.”

“...Actually, I’d prefer it if you called me Ayase.”

After hearing what I said, she made an oddly disappointed expression. Yomiuri-san most likely saw the exhaustion on my face, because she looked very worried when she came to pick me up, but she still treated me kindly with a bit of teasing as always. The lecture on the open campus was also very interesting.

The theme was love between a brother and sister, using the idea of morals and ethics changing as much as the times for their premise. The fact that love between step-siblings isn’t morally acceptable is simply because the morals of current society as a whole see it that way, but personal values do not, and should not, have any relation to that. Societal morals are always undergoing change, especially every time a person’s freedom of choice clashes with those morals in some

way or another. It was an interesting topic, to be honest.

Of course, Professor Kudou was the one who gave the lecture. While walking from left to right at the front of the classroom, she filled the whiteboard with key points, speaking so passionately that she practically frothed at the mouth. The last ten minutes were supposed to be question and answer time, but not a single person raised their hands. Looking a bit disappointed, Professor Kudou left the room after her.

If I had more energy and stamina left, I might have asked her a few things, but at this point in time, I was just exhausted. One day—in the near future, I'd like to ask her. I felt like I could ask her.

For now, I should look for people other than Asamura-kun with whom I can spend time with. Narrowness of perspective is the enemy of intelligence and ability to reason—While chewing on Kudou-sensei's words, I made my way home. While I was heading back towards the train station, a gentle breeze blew across my back. It was a fall breeze that reminded me of the cold season that was approaching.

Chapter 10: 26th of September (Saturday) – Asamura Yuuta

After eating breakfast, I immediately left my home and pedaled my bike down *Omotesando* street. Even though it was not even 9 am, a lot of people were out and about, and enough people were walking down the street for their shoulders to touch. Yeah, walking down *Omotesando* street on a weekend like this is just torture. I know that this thought in itself makes me sound like a typical loner, but I couldn't help feeling that way as I pedaled my way down the street.

I felt no presence of summer within the wind blowing against me. The scent of the scorching asphalt didn't even reach my nose, and the sizzling sensation on my skin was weak and barely existent. Sure enough, fall was coming soon. I parked my bike at the bike rack in the parking lot and looked up at the building that contained my preparatory school. It's been roughly a month since I started going only on Saturdays. My grades had clearly improved after the extra summer classes, as demonstrated on my tests and exams, so I told my parents I wanted to officially attend the prep school and convinced them to let me do so.

Of course, I wasn't lying. However, the biggest reason was just that I wanted to be anywhere but home, all so that I could get over these feelings I have for Ayase-san. The student fees consumed a decent amount of my part-time job money, but that was a necessary evil. I wasn't just trying to escape reality. Another result of my decision was that my grades had gone up even further, and my options in terms of possible universities grew wider in range. I had even been told that directly during the parent-teacher meeting the other day.

Immediately after entering the building, I stopped for a moment. Usually I would head over to classes right about now, but I had a change of heart. I looked at the map that displayed the preparatory school layout and made my way to a different location than my usual classroom.

‘Self-study Room.’

I read the plate hanging above the door. I never even realized that they had a room like this here. I opened the door quietly. I saw several desks lined up in a row with a bit of space between them, allowing for unobstructed focus. Well, it's not like this place was filled with people either. As you could probably expect. A preparatory school is a place you generally visit to attend classes and listen to teachers, and if you want to study on your own you can always do it at the library, or even a cafe. Though I bet there are a lot of students who simply don't know that this room is even here.

Looking down the row of students, I spotted a familiar face at the very end. It's Fujunami Summer Sail-san, also known as Kaho-san. Luckily, there was some space open next to her. Since she's sitting in the row the farthest in the back, there's nobody else behind her, so I guess that allows for even better focus, huh? In what I assume was a coincidence, Fujunami-san raised her head and spotted me. She then gently nodded and put one finger to her lips, signaling me to be quiet, like she meant to emphasize that no private conversations were allowed in the self-study room. Well, I never had any intention of calling out to her in the first place.

I sat down in the final row and took out my studying tools. Since I (obviously) didn't have anything to talk to Fujunami-san about, I simply focused on my studies. After a bit of time passed and I made good progress with my studies, I understood how pleasant the atmosphere inside this room was. The A/C was regularly giving us cool air, and thanks to the walls on each side of my table, all I could see was what was on my own desk, allowing me to focus even more.

Similarly, since only other students with the intention of studying were around me, I could feel myself feeling a lot more motivated than usual. This is much better than a library room or cafe with people constantly moving in and out. Thanks to my increased focus, the next time I spaced out, it was already lunchtime. My stomach quietly grumbled. The number of people in the room had decreased as well. They probably went to eat lunch. I cleaned up my desk and stood up, thinking that I might as well buy something to eat from the convenience store myself.

Fujinami-san did the same, walking towards me. I was confused for a moment, but since I couldn't bother the people around us, I just silently walked with her to the door. Once we stepped out onto the hallway, I spoke up.

"Are you going out to eat lunch as well, Fujinami-san?"

"Yes. Also..."

"Hm?"

"Since you came all the way to the seat close to mine, I was wondering if you needed something from me."

"Ah, well..."

It's not that I had no feelings like that. Ever since I met her at the golf simulation place, I felt like talking with her a bit more, but—

"I didn't really have any urgent business or anything like that..."

"Ah, is that so?"

"...Well, if you're going to eat lunch, maybe it'd be best to hurry?"

"I was planning on eating something from the convenience store."

"Same here."

"Then let's buy something first. We can always eat in the lounge."

"I've never been there, now that you mention it. All right, sounds good."

"Yeah, let's go."

According to what Fujinami-san told me, the lounge is like a resting area that everybody can use at their leisure. You can even eat and drink there (although they prohibit ramen, udon, or any dishes with a strong odor). Well, it's probably the same as the break room at my work.

We bought some lunch at the convenience store next to the

preparatory school. I went with some stuffed bread and a bottle of tea, while Fujinami-san reached for the *onigiri* first, but then went for the fruit sandwich as well as some vegetable juice. We brought everything to the lounge, managed to find an open table, and ate our lunch while talking. Though it's not like I had that many topics we could talk about at my disposal, so we ran out of things to discuss fairly quickly.

"You really didn't have anything to talk about with me, I see."

When Fujinami-san said that, I was honestly pretty depressed. Well, she's right. I myself am wondering what exactly I'm even doing.

"Well, I guess."

"I was thinking of turning you down, you see. Saying something like 'I come here to study, so this is a bit much.'"

In other words, she thought I was approaching her because I wanted to hit on her.

"That wasn't my intent. Though I was interested in talking with you, that's it."

"Isn't that a cliché phrase you use when trying to hit on someone? Saying that you're simply interested in them."

"...Maybe?"

"Yes."

"Right, sorry about that. I didn't mean for it to look that way. My bad." I lowered my head as I apologized.

"It's fine. It didn't seem that way to me either. Though I'm done looking like that type of woman."

"That type of woman... Wait."

"The type of girl who's easy to pick up. Since I don't go to school, I apparently look like the type of girl who only plays around. Well, the fact that it's not entirely wrong makes me want to cry, but still."

“You don’t go to school? Ah, sorry, I didn’t mean to pry into your personal affairs.”

“It’s fine. More accurately speaking, I don’t attend school in the afternoon.”

“In the afternoon... Ahh, so you go to a part-time school sort of place?”

“Since it’s different from an average all-day school, many people think I don’t take school seriously. So, Asamura-san, if you heard the words ‘part-time school,’ ‘girl,’ and ‘goes to a game center late at night’ in the same sentence, what would you think?”

These words sounded oddly similar to me.

“I would think that a girl who attends a part-time school relaxes at a game center at night, but that’s about it.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“Are you being serious? You wouldn’t see me as a girl that has a lot of problems? You wouldn’t see me as a girl who’s easy to hit on and pick up?”

I see. So that’s why she thought I was hitting on her.

“Sorry. I don’t know anybody close to me who attends a school with that kind of system, so it just seemed that way to me. I apologize if I offended you in any way, but I really wasn’t looking at you like that.”

“Hmmmm. Well... if that is true, then it would be a very appreciative way of understanding. And very pleasant.”

“I guess so. If there’s one thing I was curious about, then—”

And this is just my prejudice.

“I’m curious why you seem to really like golf, Fujinami-san.”

Her eyes opened wide.

“That?”

“I mean, it’s pretty unexpected to me, and I can’t help but be curious about it. It was unexpected to see a girl go to a golf simulation place so late at night.”

“It’s basically that I went at that specific time because I wanted to. It was between work and after school. That was the only time I actually had some freedom, so of course I would go then.”

“Yeah, when I heard that you were at a part-time school, I guessed as much.”

The part-time school system exists for people to get a chance of education alongside their actual job. So, after her job was over, she’d have school, which then would stretch late into the evening, only leaving her with a small time frame to go to that golf place. Though, I’m a bit unclear about her motives behind that.

“The thing is, my family actually enjoys golf a lot, so I figured they would be happy if I could play it with them.”

“Oh wow.”

“My family actually isn’t very wealthy. However, these people met at a golf circle at university, and they still enjoy playing together. If I get better at it, we might as well go to a golf course, they said.”

“I see. That sounds nice.” I commented, but felt a sense of discomfort when she called her family ‘these people’.

Of course, I didn’t want to invade her privacy by asking her about that. Though I have to say, when she’s sitting right in front of me like this, her height sure sticks out. She’s probably 180cm tall at least. Because she was wearing simple clothes even on a weekend day, she gave off a plain feeling. She’s very careful with her choice of words, and she said that a lot of people would see her as an easy target to get hit on, but if you asked me, she looked like an honor student at Suisei. I can tell how clever she is simply by talking with her. But I also saw two holes in her ears, probably for earrings.

“Well, the fact that it’s not entirely wrong makes me want to cry, but

still.”

Since there was nothing inside those holes, I felt another pang of discomfort. Maybe she has some special circumstances.

“Asamura-kun, you keep a fair view about everything, huh?”

“I wonder. I’d like to think that that’s how I handle things, but...”

The reason I don’t have such a contrived worldview, and the reason I don’t come across overly arrogant or narcissistic, is probably all thanks to me reading a lot of books.



“Is that so? Personally, it looks to me that you are very fair in your exchanges with others.”

“Thanks. I’m glad you feel that way,” I responded, and Fujinami-san showed a faint smile.

“I always thought that there was no value in talking to other students at the preparatory school, but conversing with you like this is fun,

Asamura-kun.”

“Maybe.”

“Will you come to the self-study room tomorrow as well?”

“I have afternoon classes Saturday and Sunday, but I should be able to make it in the morning... I think.”

“Then let’s eat lunch together again.” Her tone of voice and choice of expressions sounded a bit more open and friendly than before.

“Got it.”

She gathered all her trash and stood up. I followed suit, and then I spoke up.

“By the way, there’s something I’m curious about.”

“Eh... what is it?”

“At the convenience store, you reached for the *onigiri* but decided against it. Did you not like the stuffing by any chance?” When I asked her this casual question, she showed a surprised reaction, oddly enough.

“You saw that?”

“Well, I just happened to notice.”

“I see. I mean, I considered buying *onigiri*, but decided against it in the end. It’s *onigiri* after all.”

What does she mean by that?

“The seaweed might end up sticking to my teeth. That’s why I didn’t.”

“Ohhh.”

“Anyway, see you tomorrow!”

Almost like she was trying to run away, she quickly made her way

back towards the self-study room. While watching her leave, I pondered something. Doing self-study in the morning and taking classes in the afternoon is pretty efficient, isn't it?

Evening arrived, and the world lost a lot of its heat. I once again rode my bike from the preparatory school to the bookstore, since I had a shift that day. I changed into my uniform and entered the main store and immediately received orders from the store manager. He told me to hit the register with him. What a rare occurrence.

"Neither Yomiuri-kun nor Ayase-kun have a shift here today, so it seems like you're stuck with this old man. Sorry about that."

"No no, please don't say that. So neither of them have a shift today, huh?"

I knew that Ayase-san would be off work today, but I didn't know that Yomiuri-senpai was off work as well.

"Yeah, Yomiuri-kun had to help at her university."

"Do you happen to know why?"

"She said that today was an open campus day."

"Oh, I see."

"At first, she had planned on coming over after she was done. I didn't hear it directly from her, but she said something like 'There's a professor that really wears me out~ I can't muster up the strength to even work after that!' if I remember correctly."

Manager, you didn't have to imitate her voice... A professor that tires out Yomiuri-senpai, though, huh? It must be that person I saw with her last month at that pancake shop. That reminds me, Ayase-san said she was heading to an open campus event as well, but I didn't know it was on the same day. Coincidences like these really happen, huh? Then again, if you want to avoid doing it during longer breaks, the best days are Saturdays, Sundays, and other holidays, so I imagine most universities hold it around the same timeframe.

According to the manager, having two talented workers missing will

lower overall efficiency. When the register is crowded, there's no time to think about anything else. Thus, I was forced to live through hell with him at my side. After returning home, I entered the living room, and I noticed that somebody had gotten there before me. However, I had thought it was my old man, and not—

“Welcome home, Nii-san.”

“...I'm back. Huh? What about dinner?”

“I didn't have any yet. Neither did you, right?” She asked as she poured some miso soup into a small bowl.

I opened the fridge, took out some salad, and put it down on the table along with some dressing. From the instructions Ayase-san would provide on a small note, my body already had started remembering every small detail. *Natto*, and then—

“I finished grilling the mackerel.”

“Then I'll grate the radish.”

As doing it by hand would take some time, I decided to use the radish grater with a tube opening to grate the radish today.

“How much rice do you want?”

“A small bowl, please.”

“What about drinks?” I asked Ayase-san while taking out plates and preparing two pairs of chopsticks.

“I'll take some warm tea. It's gotten a lot cooler recently.”

“Gotcha.”

I put some tea leaves into the small teapot, pouring hot water into it from the insulated pot. While that was steeping, I prepared two teacups.

“Thanks.”

“You took care of the food, and even attended that open campus even today, so I can take care of the rest. You must be tired, no?”

“Not as much as you after a shift at work.”

After we finished all the preparations, we sat down together, enjoying our late dinner. Once a brief moment of silence passed, we both started telling each other about our day. I began telling her about the preparatory school, about the self-study room I hadn’t known about, and about how it helped improve my studying a lot.

“Huh, so that preparatory school has a place like that?”

“Have you ever visited that school before?”

“Never. It’s a bit too expensive.”

Ayase-san then described her experiences during the open campus.

“Wait, you actually ran into Yomiuri-senpai after all?!”

Ayase-san nodded.

“But why do you sound so surprised?”

“I heard from the manager that Yomiuri-senpai also was busy because of an open campus, which is why she had to take the day off. That’s when I found out that you both were off for the same reason.”

“Ahhh, so that’s why...”

“So, what was it like at that university?”

“I’m exhausted.”

“What?”

“Ah, wait, no. The open campus in itself was really interesting. It made me realize that you can study all sorts of things at a university... though calling it ‘studying’ might not be totally accurate.”

“I thought a school or university was a place to study?”

“Yeah, about that... How do I put this? I realized that it’s more like a place to think. And not in the sense that somebody tells you to think about it, but rather to find your own thought process, and put it into your own words.”

I couldn’t confidently state that I immediately understood what she was talking about. The place I knew as a school and the place called a university that Ayase-san was describing seemed to be a bit different.

“And there was a really weird professor.”

“Weird in what way?”

“That’s all I can say... but I ended up in a bit of a discussion with her.”

Wait... she had a discussion with a person during their first encounter? I was genuinely surprised. Ayase-san might be someone who perpetually revolts against the unfairness of the world and its inhabitants, but I didn’t think she was the type of person to actually stand face to face with someone and have a verbal discussion.

“The discussion got heated, and I was practically exhausted when it was over.”

“...But, it was fun, no?” I asked, and Ayase-san’s eyes widened in response.

“Huh? Ah, yeah... I... think so. You could tell?”

“You had a pretty joyful expression when you said how exhausted you were, so I guessed it was fun for you.”

“...I see, so you saw right through me.” Ayase-san averted her gaze, muttering to herself.

“Are you interested in Tsukinomiya now?”

“I don’t know if I can make it there, but... I think I’ll at least try my best for it.”

I see. I'm glad to hear that. Ayase-san tried something new and encountered someone who piqued her interest. She managed to have a new encounter. Well, I can't say I wasn't bothered by the fact that this happened without me around, and with someone I didn't know.

"So, A—Nii-san, are you going to visit that self-study room regularly?"

"Well... I guess I will. I made a promise to head over there tomorrow as well."

"Promise?"

"Hm? Yeah, with the person who told me about it. They're gonna be there tomorrow as well, so we promised to eat lunch together again."

"Oh, I see. Good for you, Nii-san."

That's right, this is something good—for both of us. Just as Ayase-san has had an encounter that increased her motivation to head to university, I've had a new encounter at my prep school, so we've both made new acquaintances. This is how things are supposed to be—how they should be.

"I can't make dinner tomorrow," Ayase-san said. She told me about a study session she was planning on having with some of her classmates.

"Got it. I'll be busy tomorrow as well, so... I guess we can just buy some ready-made food."

I have prep school tomorrow, as well as a shift at work later. We both have our own share of appointments tomorrow, and our schedules aren't going to overlap one bit. I feel like we're slowly becoming typical 17-year old siblings.

Chapter 11: 27th of September (Sunday) – Asamura Yuuta

It felt like the final struggle of summer. With the sun shining directly down onto the earth, the temperatures rose drastically, and by the time I made it to the prep school, it was at least 30°C. In order to immediately escape this heat, I quickly made my way inside the building. After the automatic door closed behind me, separating me from the outside heat, I finally felt like I was able to breathe. After taking a deep breath of the cool air, I started walking.

I opened the door with the 'Self-study room' plate above it. Even though I had arrived at about the same time as yesterday, the room was a lot more crowded. I looked around the room and spotted Fujinami-san sitting at the same place as yesterday. Luckily, the seat next to her was open, so I took the opportunity to occupy it. She had already been working on her textbooks and notes for a while, judging from how focused she was.

Naturally, I didn't call out to her. I simply took out my material, focusing on my physics workbook, which had cost me a few points in my end-of-term exams, thus my final grade was only 70 points. However, that doesn't correspond to me not understanding what they taught us in class—I think. Assuming the questions were all fair, achieving 70% like that is a totally fine achievement.

That being said, I just have trouble coming up with the correct formula to calculate these things. The physical phenomena taught in high school are mostly things you can envision while reading a book, and I try my best to remember them before it reaches that class in question. I just keep falling behind in speed when it comes to actually performing the calculations.

Now then... Hmm, write down the speed of acceleration an object on a smooth slope experiences, huh? Usually, and not only limited to physics, the most general advice when it comes to exam questions is to first read the question carefully. For example, what stands out is

the phrase 'Smooth slope'. In other words, it's a slope where you don't have to consider friction.

The reason that an average cardboard box, when set at the top of a hill, doesn't slide down like a block of ice is because of the friction between the ground and the box. However, average high school physics questions usually don't follow such a pragmatic approach. On a whim, I started thinking about how this would play out at a university. Ayase-san's words from yesterday floated around in my mind.

'And not in the sense that somebody tells you to think about it, but rather to find your own thought process and put it into your own words.'

In other words, when attending university, you create the problem you then have to resolve yourself. For example, what if this slope actually had friction? What if this slope didn't even exist on a planet like earth? That sounds pretty fun, to be honest. Oh yeah, that was something like that in a science fiction novel I read. If something like this happens on the surface of the moon, there's barely any gravity to measure, and even a drop of water runs down your skin a lot slower than it would on earth. Oh man, I can't even imagine what shower scenes would look like if they were animated... Acceleration, yep. Back to acceleration. Um...

I heard the sound of pencils scribbling on top of the paper, followed by the sound of the paper being turned over. Whenever I finished a question and flipped over the page, almost as if responding to my success, someone else flipped over their page as well. It's like a competition of sorts. An odd feeling of solidarity filled me, making me smirk.

However, I still continued to work through my problems in silence, with Fujinami-san next to me. Suddenly, I heard a sliding sound, and when I raised my head, Fujinami-san had gotten up from her seat and was looking over at me. Without uttering a word, she grabbed her bag and pointed at the door.

...Huh? Is it time already? I panicked a bit and checked my smartphone, and I saw that it was already past 12. I was so focused that lunchtime had arrived without me realizing it. After stepping out

onto the hallway, Fujinami-san spoke up.

“Let’s have lunch at a family restaurant today.”

“A family restaurant?”

“I know a place that’s easy on the wallet. How about it?”

“I see...”

Eating out somewhere shouldn’t hurt once in a while.

“Then let’s do that.”

As we exited the building, the outdoor heat blasted us at full force.

“It sure is warm today.”

“Well, it’s going to be the fall season soon, so this oppressive heat will only last a bit longer.”

As we chatted about the weather, we reached the family restaurant in question. Just as Fujinami-san had said, it was a place that other students often frequented because it was fairly cheap and manageable. It was some kind of Italian food chain.

After making our way through the cool interior of the restaurant, Fujinami-san and I sat at a small boxed area, near the windows, facing each other. Since we couldn’t waste too much time, we both quickly placed our orders. I went with a simple carbonara, and Fujinami-san chose the peperoncino.

“I like eating spicy stuff with lots of olive oil in it.”

“I generally enjoy spicy stuff, but... I studied a bit too hard today, so I’m feeling hungry.”

“You didn’t even notice, after all.”

“Notice what, exactly?”

“Earlier, I looked at Asamura-kun for a while... and I waited for you to notice.”

So that's what that was? I thought I had been pulled back to reality because of the sound of her chair moving, but maybe I just felt her gaze on me?

"You could have just said something."

"I didn't want to bother the other students."

"Oh yeah, why did you decide to come to this family restaurant today?"

"When I looked at you, I just had the urge. I wanted to talk with you. But there would have been too many eyes around us in the lounge. Ah, I'll grab some water for the two of us. This place has self-serve drinks."

"I'll go, then."

"No, you can stay here."

"I'll at least carry my own share."

We discussed this back and forth for a moment but eventually ended up going together. With wet towels and water in hand, we returned to our table. A bit later, we also received our food. Fujinami-san went ahead and put a lot of olive oil, which the restaurant has on the table as a condiment, on her food. She did the same with black pepper. Using a fork, she scooped up the pasta and started eating. She seems to be used to this sort of food. Maybe she comes here frequently?

Still, I wonder what Fujinami-san was so curious about that she'd stare at me back in the self-study room. Maybe I did something weird? Oh, right, I also need to do my best to help this relationship grow.

"Say, Fujinami-san, do you read books?"

"Read books? Well, I don't dislike them."

What a weird response.

"So that means... you don't particularly like them either?"

“Ah. Well, not exactly. I do like reading books, but when it comes to my own entertainment, I generally look at the cost-performance aspect. I think I mentioned it before, but I don’t have that much money to spend, so it’s hard for me to really focus on such a hobby.”

“I see...”

“For example, that golf place. On a weekday night, I can practice as much as I want for the value of two paperback books, so it feels a lot more worth it to me.”

Not to mention that she’ll make her family happy if she gets better at it.

“What kind of books do you read, Asamura-kun?”

“Um... Well, whichever piques my interest. I go from popular literature to overseas stuff, and even science-fiction or light novels.”

“Light novels? That isn’t exactly a genre, is it?”

I smirked. Of course she’d know that.

“Well, you’re not wrong. There’s science fiction, mystery stories, slice of life, action, and even sports ones sometimes... It isn’t strictly a genre, I guess. Before we were born, they were called juvenile novels.”

“Is that so?”

“Juvenile in this context means ‘Targeted at young boys and girls’, I think.”

In other words, anything aimed at audiences our age is considered juvenile. Light novels, in this contest, are novels easy to read and aimed at a younger audience—or so I’ve heard.

“If you like science fiction, then are you good with physics?”

“I wouldn’t say that. If anything, I sometimes struggle with it.”

“Really? But the subject you were working on this morning was

physics, no? Considering you were so fast at working through it, I would have imagined you were fairly good at it.”

I was surprised to hear that. She seemed to have been watching me fairly closely.

“Well, I do like the genre at least.”

“Have you read any good novels lately?”

After thinking for a bit, I told her about a recent sci-fi novel I read. It’s a translated one set in the distant future when space travel is common. Apparently even the president of America has read this novel before. Well, it’s not like someone else reading it will increase my own enjoyment of it, but it’s cool to see how other countries and cultures react to it.

“I saw it in a bookstore once, but it was a hardcover version, so I couldn’t afford it...”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

It’s actually a novel Yomiuri-senpai recommended to me. If not for that, I wouldn’t have used my paycheck to buy an expensive hardcover, either.

“Is there anything that’s a bit easier to pick up?”

“Maybe one that was turned into a movie recently? It’s a paperback book, and it’s the story of a cat searching for summer.”

“Ah, yes, I’m reading that. It’s originally a classic overseas sci-fi novel, yes? Even I know about that one. The cat was really cute. I watched trailers for the movie, and the cat was really cute there, too.”

She said ‘cute’ twice. I guess she likes cats.

“Speaking of cats, there are also stories of cats passing away.”

“Yeah...”

From then on, we started talking about books with cats in them. Oh yeah, Yomiuri-senpai actually likes that one mystery novel with the cat detective. I told Fujinami-san about it. She asked me if it was interesting, and although I had only read the preview, I told her it sounded promising at least. It was about a cat who was more clever than any human who helped people solve crimes, so of course it's quite interesting. When I told her about it, she seemed to be pretty interested.

Our interests in books aligned fairly well, and our viewpoints on many things were awfully similar, too. It felt comfortable to me, like I was talking to Ayase-san. Thinking about how getting to know new people wasn't as bad as I had initially assumed, I casually glanced out the window.

—**I spotted Ayase-san.** She was standing in front of a convenience store trying to avoid the sunshine, gleefully talking with a boy. Why is she here? And who is that boy with her? I immediately pulled my eyes away from the window. Although it was hard to tell from a distance, the boy's face felt oddly familiar. I think Ayase-san mentioned she had a study session with some people. I wonder what they're doing there? Why is it just the two of them? Where are her other classmates?

“...Haaaah.”

I heard a sigh and raised my head.

“Ah... sorry, what were we talking about?”

“Um, we weren't talking about anything.”

Urgh... awkward. I can't exactly tell her I had been distracted by Ayase-san outside the window.

“I see, well... Um...”

“You don't have to force yourself to try and find something to talk about. Well, I was actually curious about that. I mean, I brought up the self-study room at the golf place, but yesterday, when you came to the room, you looked like...” She hesitated for a moment, making

an uncertain expression. “Like you were running away from something.”

...Running away? When she said that, my chest tightened up.

“It looked like that to you?”

“Yes.” Fujinami-san said, and it seemed like the look in her eyes changed.

Her brownish-black eyes seemed like they were staring directly into my soul. It feels like I’m having an MRI scan done on me.

“Your face back then felt all too familiar to me, which is why I couldn’t help feeling curious. Since you were actually studying in that room, I realized that you were a diligent person. So if you weren’t attempting to hit on me, I figured you must be trying to run away from something, or someone.”

“Maybe...”

I personally had no intentions of doing so, but after she said all of that, I found myself unable to deny it. I was taking a step forward, seeking out new relationships and connections... or so I was telling myself, but maybe I was just turning my back towards reality and running away. If so, then I must have been exceptionally rude. After all, I treated Fujinami-san as a means of running away.



“Sorry.”

“There’s no need for you to apologize. You haven’t even done anything bad yet. Not to mention that I understand how you must feel.”

I wonder what exactly she means by that.

“I have experience seeking out other people in an attempt to run away from reality... Ah, I’m sorry, can I order some pudding? The pudding here is very delicious.” She said, picking up the tablet to place an order.

“This is my one and only thing to look forward to. The small luxury I can afford with my low pay. Even to the point where I would be willing to eat a lunch box every day. However, taking exhaustion from work into consideration, getting enough sleep is also important. If I say I’m eating outside, it’ll be less of a strain.”

Less of a strain... for who? I was about to ask but remembered. Just yesterday, when I asked if she was practicing golf, she said that she wanted to check out a golf course with her family. However, she called them ‘these people’. I remembered it vividly because something didn’t sit right with me.

This way of phrasing it sounded awfully cold, possibly indicating that she’s not too close with her parents. But she doesn’t entirely dislike them. It’s more like... she feels reserved about it? When I considered that, I realized that it might be similar to how I feel towards Akiko-san. Maybe ‘these people’ would force themselves to prepare a lunch box for her, just like Akiko-san wanted to force herself to attend the parent-teacher meetings for both Ayase-san and I. So she doesn’t want her parents to do that, but she also can’t afford to make a lunch box for herself.

That’s why she tells them she’ll eat out, and that’s why she’s a regular at a chain restaurant like this. She immediately scooped up the pudding she ordered, stuffing her cheeks as she narrowed her eyes like a happy cat. In that moment, the tall Fujinami-san looked like a small kitten.

“Mmm, the taste of happiness~ All of that for half of a 500-yen coin.”

Knowing how fixated she was on cost-performance, these words seemed very much like her. After she finished eating the pudding, she abruptly fixed her posture.

“So, to return to our previous topic... What you were running away

from, was it possibly related to love?" Since she asked me with a straight gaze, I couldn't beat around the bush.

"How did you—?"

"How did I know? Since you sought out a girl as a means of escaping, I just guessed. It happens quite often, no? Since your love didn't work out, you desperately looked for a new one to distract yourself."

"Isn't that basically the same as hitting on people?"

"If you do it purposefully, yes. However, there are not many people who are aware they are trying to run away from something. They are just aware they are avoiding something or someone, which only causes them more distress. Well, if you follow this line of thought, you'll end up becoming aware of it, I'm sure." She smiled, which hit even harder than if she had simply blamed me for it.

"I'm not really that kind, after all."

I thought that Ayase-san was always awfully dry towards other people, but Fujinami-san exceeded that even more. I always felt similar to Ayase-san with how cold she could be. It's not that she doesn't have any expectations from the other person. More accurately, she keeps up an attitude where she has no expectations from the opposite sex. She dislikes having explanations upon explanations foisted upon her, and she's never attempted to reach common ground with anyone.

During our first meeting, Ayase-san said these things in order to filter out my real personality, and I denied it. When I saw her simply smile it off without getting angry, I knew she was the same as me. But Fujinami-san's smile right now is different. She's denouncing me.

"...You know, I fell in love with the one person I should not develop feelings for."

"Very template."

"And that stabbed me right where it hurt."

"You looked like you wanted me to stab you, so I did."

I subconsciously touched my cheeks... Seriously? Ah, it seems that way. Fujinami-san is blaming me after all. Her expression resembles a doctor ready to stab his scalpel into the patient. 'This is where your bad part is, so I'm removing it'—something like that. I mean, I've only seen the face of a doctor during an operation on TV dramas and so on, but if it was a professional doctor who makes no mistakes, they would have a cold and rational expression like this, no doubt.

"If I were to prioritize my own selfish feelings, it would hurt my family. I really need to forget about these feelings, but that doesn't seem to be working out no matter what I do..."

"It's quite serious, I see."

I could only flash a wry smile myself. I guess it is that serious for me. Fujinami-san crossed her arms, closely inspecting me with a 'Hmmm.'

"Do you have time today after your prep school classes?"

"I have a shift at work."

"Then let's meet after that."

"I don't mind, but... can I ask why?"

"Let's have some fun, okay? You won't regret it."

Honestly speaking, since I had just recently gone out late with Yomiuri-senpai... actually, I wasn't too bothered by that. I hesitated, thinking of declining at first, but then the sight of Ayase-san and that male classmate came back to mind. Gloomy and hazy feelings from deep down in my chest reached up to my throat, leaving me unable to say anything.

"If you need an excuse, then you can just use me as a means of running away from reality. How does that sound?"

"...Now I have no reason to say no."

"Perfect. It's decided then."

We exchanged LINE IDs and returned to the prep school.

By the time my shift was over, it was already 9 pm. Even so, the streets of Shibuya were as crowded as ever. Shadows of the pedestrians danced through the night, illuminated by the street lights. Fujinami-san and I promised to meet up—not at the famous Hachiko statue, but rather right in front of the bookstore where I work, just past the intersection near the statue.

“Sorry for the wait.” I said.

Though since we had decided upon the time and location, I don’t think I made her wait that long.

“I just got here myself.” Fujinami-san responded.

“So where are we going?”

“There’s no need to rush things. The night is still young.”

“I don’t plan on pulling an all-nighter, okay?” I said with a stern tone.

Fujinami-san let out a snicker, telling me that she was just teasing.

“So you work here part-time, Asamura-kun?”

“Ah, yeah. You come by as a customer pretty often, no?”

“Yes. You could have just told me.”

I didn’t mean to actively hide it, but we both weren’t exactly close enough for me to tell her either.

“I often come here before work, right after they open shop.”

“Ahh, that’s why I’ve never seen you despite you being a regular.”

That makes total sense. She would always come by when I’m at school after all.

“So why don’t we walk around a bit? I won’t take you to any dangerous places, though, so you don’t have to be so cautious.”

“I’m thankful for that. I’m not too confident in my physical strength.”

“Your honesty is appreciated,” Fujinami-san said and started walking ahead of me.

From the center of town, we returned to the train station. And then, Fujinami Maho’s Shibuya-at-night tour began.

“For a healthy and wholesome high school boy like Asamura-kun, something like karaoke is probably fairly common for you, no?”

So going for karaoke is considered wholesome? If so, then where are all the delinquent high school boys in today’s world going during their time off?

“Hmm, I’m not really a karaoke regular.”

I usually go around once every three months with Maru. The reason for that is because Maru wants to practice all the anime songs for currently airing anime. He would memorize the lyrics on his own time, and then let me listen to it to see if it sounds right. In fact, Maru is actually pretty good at singing. Not to mention that he has the volume to back it up. I guess he’s used to shouting occasionally during his baseball matches.

“What an honor student you are. Then how about this place over there? Ever tried it?”

I looked across the street, spotting a black building illuminated by bright lights.

“A bowling alley?”

“Not just that. It’s a joint amusement facility, I guess. Bowling, billiards, karaoke, table tennis, and even a game center.”

We made our way over there, and it turned out to be a building I had passed by several times but never entered.

“Sure is big.”

“And perfectly safe. By the way, a long time ago, bowling and

billiards were regarded as adult pleasures. Bowling boomed in the 70s, and billiards in the 80s.”

“Wait, hold on.”

I was forced to organize my thoughts.

“That makes it half a century ago, almost. The people who played it back during that time are even older than my old man.”

“Most likely. I was born in the 21st century, so these people are from the generation of my grandparents. This facility in itself is new, though, and since it’s close to the train station, it’s easy to remember. It’s even open until the first train of the next morning, so you can spend the night there if you miss the last train.”

Does this mean she’s had to rely on that before?

“I’ll try to remember that.”

Though it doesn’t really matter in my case, since I can reach my home either after a short walk or by riding my bike. After that, we returned to the train station, making our way to Shibuya Hikarie¹. It was currently 9:27 pm. The sushi-go-round restaurants and curry shops were earning money as usual, not lacking for customers. Before my old man remarried and the Ayase Family moved in with us, I once had dinner here at this place while on the way home.

In that context, it may be a familiar scenery to me, but Fujinami-san told me about all sorts of establishments that I had never visited before.

“Asamura-kun is a high school student, so the best I can do is show you the outside of the bars and clubs...”

“Aren’t you around the same age as me, Fujinami-san?”

“We may be, but the experience we’ve gathered is completely different, Asamura-kun.”

She sounded like the protagonist out of a story that had gone through several lives already. I never would have imagined to actually hear

this kind of phrase in reality.

“Something like that.”

As we walked around the train station (basically passing from the East gate to the South gate), Fujinami-san didn't follow Tamagawa street, but instead walked down a small alley.

“When you live in Shibuya, you tend to forget the silence the night brings. In the countryside, once 7 pm rolls around, even the entertainment districts in many towns go dark.”

“Have you ever gone out there?”

“From time to time you like to visit a place where nobody knows you, right?”

It's not like I understand where she's coming from. If you asked me if I had ever done something like that, the closest I've come was kicking empty cans at a public park late at night. What cleared up my feelings the most was properly throwing away the cans in the small container next to the vending machine.

“You weren't doing anything bad, so I think you should be more confident about yourself.”

“Maybe I simply don't have any guts?”

“Even if you had guts to act immoral or commit a crime, those kinds of guts wouldn't assist you in life. Ah, right here. If you like books, you'd best remember this place.” Fujinami-san said, standing in front of an average three-floor building.

“What is this place?”

“A library room.”

“Huh?”

“Or so they call it, but it's a place where you can also drink alcohol. It's a location that allows you to read books while enjoying some drinks, so it's popular with both book readers and alcohol enjoyers.

Once you've graduated and become an adult, I recommend you check it out."

"...I hate to ask the same thing again, but you are a minor, right, Fujinami-san?"

"Of course. I only know about it, that's all."

Even so, she sure knows a lot about places like these for being a minor. However, whichever place she may have shown me, she never once tried to enter. Of course, that was a relief to me (Also because they all looked awfully expensive, and I don't think I'd be able to pay for much with my salary). We simply walked down the streets of the entertainment district, as she drew a mental map for me.

We continued to stroll through Shibuya at night. Since she said we'd be having some fun, I figured she had a concrete location in mind, but we were simply looking at all sorts of establishments, never stopping once. However, just walking around Shibuya, looking at the various people you passed by, was pretty fun. And I realized that the city had more to offer than I thought. During this time, it felt like we were fish swimming through the wide ocean.

Entertainment districts are a common phenomenon in larger cities, but that doesn't make them particularly safe areas. Just walking along the street made me feel nervous from time to time. Fujinami-san continued brazenly walking forwards, despite the possibility of something happening every time we walked into a small side alley. This also happened in the main street.

By one corner, I spotted a girl my age clinging to the arm of a man who could be my old man. I imagine she's a minor, but her face was red from alcohol, and she was asking for more with a shaky voice. Another salaryman with his tie opened up laid on the ground like a tree that had fallen over, sound asleep, and there was another woman who was puking below a street lamp.

"They're all lost in the night, right? And yet they have a mask they put on, acting serious during the day." She commented.

"Well, I guess so? Even my old man came home drunk from time to

time.”

Now that she mentioned it, the reason my old man even met Akiko-san in the first place was that he had been dragged into the bar where she works by his superior, ending up drunk in the process.

“When walking down the back alleys of Shibuya,” Fujinami-san continued, “The world looks full to the brim of bad, wrong people. However, sometimes I think about what is regarded as right or wrong.”

“Well, having a sugar daddy is a bit questionable.”

Of course, that doesn’t mean I accept having a sugar mommy, either.

“You need to understand that there are people who can only live this way. Even myself, when I was in middle school—” She glanced over towards a girl who was entering a narrow alleyway.

“I was in the middle of all of these bad people. Right now, I am taking things seriously though, working in the morning, and attending part-time school in the evening.”

“...Um.” I couldn’t help but tilt my head in confusion.

So basically, what she wanted me to see weren’t the tourist spots in Shibuya at night, but rather the people who are living under the colorful streetlights?

“They’re aware that they are not normal, that they’re not average in the eyes of society. However, every single person, no matter which side you view them from, are shaped by the surroundings they have been thrown into, so there’s no absolute right or wrong...”

I finally understood what she was trying to tell me. However, the part I still was confused about was—

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Watching you makes me feel like I’m watching my past self, and it annoys me.”

“I look like you did in the past?”

“Those types of people.” She said and pointed at a certain group of people.

Drunken men were staggering down the street with beet-red faces. A young man wearing a happi coat was trying to advertise the establishment behind him, and beyond him was a woman with wide-open cleavage handing out flyers.

“You—were raised in a way that won’t let you have any expectations of women, right?”

I gulped.

“You keep a flat and dry outlook. This may be your strong point, but considering the reason you were raised this way, it also is a weakness.”

“Weakness...”

“I asked you earlier, right? What you thought about a girl who goes to part-time school during the day, then goes out late to a game center.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Back then, you simply accepted it at face value. That is very admirable, showing that you can have an unbiased point of view. However, if I were to guess the reason why you even acquired this kind of view—” Fujinami-san let out a sigh and paused like she was searching for the right words.

She looked down the street, not giving me a glance, as she continued.

“It’s because you grew up without any expectations of women.”

These words brought back some old memories of when I was a young child back to my mind. The sound of an album I had stopped listening to, and the never-smiling face of my mother. Fujinami-san explained that the reason I acquired this flat personality was that I had been forced to watch a good-for-nothing person. In this case, a

woman. And she said that she understood how I felt since she had gone through the same thing before.

“Although in my case, it wasn’t a problem specific to a man or woman. It was just humans in general.”

After that, she began telling me about her past without a shred of hesitation. It happened back when she was in middle school. She lost both her parents at the same time due to an accident. Even though she deserved sympathy and support from the people around her, they instead showered her with cold gazes and words. Her parents’ marriage apparently was against the wishes of the entirety of all their relatives, so when the funeral happened, all Fujinami-san heard wasn’t sadness and grief, but rather belittling of them and people saying that they had deserved this fate.

Even worse, the aunt who took her in never showed her any love. She always spoke harshly of Fujinami-san’s parents. Of course, not directly, but in a roundabout way, apparently.

“How cruel...”

“Well, if you went through that, you’d end up going off the rails, no?”

I couldn’t do anything besides stay silent and nod.

“Well, of course you would. However, the emotion I felt towards my aunt wasn’t anger, but simply a sense of resignation, and that this couldn’t be helped.”

That apparently was the moment she stopped having any expectations from other people. Ever since then, she began running away from home, or staying out late, in order to protest and rebel against her aunt, living a desolated life. Because of these mental reasons, her physical condition never improved, and she ended up skipping a lot of school.

I understood her point. It’s not like my past was as tragic as hers, but I had never received anything from my real mother either. So while walking next to Fujinami-san, I told her about my own past. Though my words were clearly overshadowed by her previous monologue.

While talking, we managed to take an entire round trip through Shibuya, reaching *Dougenzaka*. It shouldn't take long for the date to change either. With both of her hands in her pockets, Fujinami-san looked up at the sky. Since she was even taller than me, a lot of people passing by turned around to look at her, showing gazes of admiration and surprise. Some people were even giving me dubious looks. Excuse me. I'm not the one dragging her around here. I'm simply following her.

"Ahh, so frustrating."

"What is?"

"We supposedly get a harvest moon tonight."

I looked up at the sky myself, seeing the bright moon beyond the thin clouds. I see. So it's a full moon tonight. When I walked home from Shibuya with Ayase-san on that day, there was also a bright moon like this.

"From now on, the moon will rise even higher."

"Really?"

"During the summer, the sun will rise high, whereas the moon has a low orbit. The full moon, that is. In winter it's the opposite, and the moon rises high. During this time, the moon is still hanging low, but it's going to start rising more and more now."

"Expected knowledge from someone who likes physics."

"If anything, you'd call that knowledge about astronomy. Well, I do like it."

Fujinami-san looked down from the sky and directly at me. I really don't know why she cares for me this much.

"You say that you don't have any expectations for women, but that probably is a lie."

"That's not..."

“The case, yes? I thought the same thing.” Fujinami-san guessed what I was about to say and continued. “Until my grandmother pointed it out, I would have never found out that I was lying to myself. That I was deceiving myself.”

“Grandmother—”

“My current family. Someone different from my aunt. I was adopted.”

While she was playing around late at night, the female manager of an illegal sex-oriented establishment found her. That person was skilled at taking care of others, and apparently protected the girl who had fallen out of society from being wrapped up in any criminal acts. She was unable to leave Fujinami-san alone after hearing about her complicated family environment.

After discussing things with Fujinami-san’s family, including her aunt, as well as a specialist, Fujinami-san was adopted by that person. So on the first day they started living together, that woman told Fujinami-san the following words.

“‘You know, you should probably come to a common understanding with your own heart’, she said.”

“Common understanding?”

“Compromise, or adjustment. Basically, to not ignore my feelings. That I don’t have any expectations from my mother, that I’m not angry, that this really couldn’t be helped—was I really fine with that? That’s what she asked me.” Was the reason she leaned against the street lamp while saying this because she couldn’t stand without any support?

Maybe I was just thinking too deeply into it.

“‘What if you actually wanted to have expectations from someone, but your expectations were betrayed once. You must be angry, right?’ She told me, but I disagreed, saying that wasn’t the case.”

“And... then?”

“She asked me why I was even acting like a delinquent. That was the

moment for me. I just started crying. I cried all night.”

At that exact moment, the light turned off. It might have run out of energy. However, in the same moment, the cloud above our heads disappeared, revealing the bright moon directly above us. It was a beautiful harvest moon.

“Are you trying to forcefully bottle up your feelings, hoping that they will one day be erased, Asamura-kun?”

My voice wouldn’t come out. The bright artificial lights of Shibuya lit up the area, her smile most certainly illuminated by the shop window she was facing, and yet it felt like the bright moon above us was what was creating the light.

“I mean... I can’t reveal my feelings... no matter what.”

“It would be great if feelings would vanish after you’ve suppressed them long enough. After my parents passed away... it’s been five years. That evening, for the first time, I realized that these feelings that should have been long gone still plagued me.”

“Five years?”

“Feelings don’t disappear. That was the trigger, and that person became my foster parent, freeing me from my aunt. My unstable physical condition disappeared like it had never even existed. I realized that I had never forgiven my aunt and our relatives, and that I was still hung up on that.”

Clouds covered the moon once more, and only the lights of the surrounding buildings illuminated Fujinami-san’s expression.

“I still believe that your ability to look at others in an unbiased way is your strong point, and something that’s rare in people. However, looking at a person in a flat and dry way is different from having no expectations of them. We are human, after all. We can’t help but get our hopes up.”

No matter how much you plead, if you can’t receive what you truly wish for from the bottom of your heart, the scars will remain. We are human after all, huh? The conversation I had with Ayase-san on the

day we met came back to mind. Back then she said something to me when the two of us were alone together.

‘I won’t have any great expectations from you, so I want you to do the same for me.’

I remembered Ayase-san’s probing expression. She said this to me, since we would start living together from then on, and I felt relieved to hear it. It was because I thought we were the same. If you looked at it objectively, these words were almost so rude you wouldn’t dare to say them during a first meeting. They were words that could even result in anger, but even so, she showed me her true intentions. She searched for a direct confrontation... maybe I didn’t see it at all.

Did she really not have any expectations? And I could also ask that same question of myself. I only saw this as my old man marrying again. Or maybe I tried to see it that way, but did I really not expect anything at all?

“Listen, Asamura-kun. If you really were acting in a flat and dry way, you wouldn’t keep saying ‘I don’t have any expectations of women’ deep down inside of you. The moment you keep emphasizing that, you stop acting in a flat way. You become conscious of it, and are shaken by it even more.”

I couldn’t say anything. I could come up with nothing at all to rebut anything Fujinami-san was telling me.

“Sorry for talking about something so gloomy. I just felt that way while watching you. That you gave up on your own feelings, stopped prioritizing yourself, and simply hoped for the best from other people. That’s the type of person you are, right? The type of person who immediately trips up when common sense and ethics are involved.”

“I find it questionable for a human being to not have common sense.”

“That’s exactly what I mean. You really are helpless.” Fujinami-san sighed.

And then she continued explaining. Not having any expectations of

other people. Even if you keep telling yourself that this is the norm, and keep deceiving yourself, you still expect some things and get angry if these expectations aren't fulfilled, constantly taking damage from that without even being aware of it.

"Basically, it's more like 'You're the one at fault for getting my hopes up', right?"

"But getting angry at someone because they didn't live up to your one-sided expectations is way too selfish."

"It is selfish, but so are people's feelings. That's why I don't think you should lie to yourself. A lie can't continue forever." She left these words behind, waved her hand, and walked away.

Below the vanishing light of the street lamps, I watched her walk off into the distance. I couldn't argue back. I answered with silence. Even after midnight passed, the noise and sounds of Shibuya did not vanish. Neverending, never-moving, just as I stood still at that very moment. Though it felt like the moon in the sky was smiling down at me.

1 Tokyo skyscraper and retail complex

Chapter 12: 27th of September (Sunday) – Ayase Saki

“Sakiii! Over here~!”

I walked past the ticket gate towards Maaya as she waved her hand at me. She was surrounded by a few classmates of ours. I might actually have been the last one to arrive, so I sped up a bit. While making my way over there, I counted the number of people. Two boys and three girls, including Maaya. If you count me, that makes six people in total. I guess I really am the last one.

“Sorry, did I make you wait long?”

“Not at all! There’s still some time left until we were supposed to meet up!” Maaya said with a smile, but I was unsure if I could take that at face value.

Today’s study session will be happening at Maaya’s home. She apparently lives in a flat nearby, but she rarely ever has people over. Her younger brothers are always around, and she has to look after them. Even if she asked a friend over, she would be forced to look after her brothers. That being said, today her parents took her brothers with her, so she can use the living room freely, and she offered to hold the study session there. After making our way away from the train station and walking a bit, we quickly reached the flat with Maaya’s apartment.

“Woah, it’s huge!”

“What a big place!”

“I did my best with it!”

“It’s not like you had any influence in that, Maaya.”

“Hey now, Saki! Let’s not bring that up!” Maaya’s light tone made everyone around her laugh.

I guess I just don't personally have this kind of skill. But I remembered what Professor Kudou said during yesterday's lecture. There are six people here today, two of them boys, and one of them is Shinjou-kun, who planned this study session in the first place. For now, I started planning on getting to know them.

After passing through the entrance, we headed to the elevator. Despite the building being so enormous, the elevators seemed to be oddly narrow, so it looked like we would barely manage to fit all six of us in there. Because of this, the two boys ended up taking the elevator after us. After the elevator came to a halt, the automatic door opened and we got off. Beneath the plate with the room number was a wooden plaque that read 'WELCOME' in adorable handwriting. Probably out of an abundance of caution, they hadn't written their family name anywhere. Maaya opened the front door and we all went inside. The living room was about 16 square meters in size, and everybody raised voices of excitement upon seeing that.

"So huuuuuge!"

"Yeah, we have more than enough space for our study session here."

"How nice~"

"Feel free and have a seat wherever~" Maaya urged us, so everyone took their seats around the table.

As for Maaya, she headed towards the kitchen. I realized what she was planning on doing, so I set down my bag and followed her.

"Huh? Saki, the toilet's not this way, you know?"

"Dummy. Come on, give me some of that."

I stole three of the one-liter bottles with tea that Maaya had tried to carry alone and headed back to the living room.

"Everyone, go ahead and grab some of that! Saki-chan, thanks a bunch~" The one who raised her voice now was the girl Maaya always called 'Yumicchi.'

Shinjou-kun also stood up immediately to help. The coasters and

glasses had already been set out earlier.

“The people who are worried about the water droplets from the glasses are free to use tissues~!”

“Maaya, it’s okay already, just sit down. You’ll make us feel restless if you do that.”

“Saki is so kind~ Here are some snacks that won’t get your hands dirty.”

“...We’re here to study, right?”

“Of course? But sweets are essential.”

“It seems like the image I have of a study session is different from the image Maaya has...”

Everybody laughed. Though I have to say, this really isn’t something to laugh about. I know her, and she is being serious. At this rate, this’ll turn into a tea party more than anything. Well, considering the goal that I have in mind, that in itself also wouldn’t hurt either—
Wait, no.

“So, how will we handle this study session?” Maaya asked.

“Is there any subject you’d like to focus on?” I asked.

“I’m fine with anything~”

“That’s Narasaka-san for you. She gets top grades in every subject.”

“Honor students really are different~”

“Hee hee, you can praise me some more~ Jokes aside, how about we all work on the subjects we’re the worst at?”

“The subject we’re the worst at?”

“For Yumicchi, that would be Japanese, right?”

Yumicchi looked a bit cute as she pouted.

“It’s simple~ With these numbers, there’s bound to be someone who’s good at a subject. That way we can teach each other if one of us is bad at something.”

Ahh, I see. That makes sense. If we focus on the difference between subjects we’re good and bad at, it changes the question from ‘I don’t know if this is right or wrong’ to ‘I don’t know if this is the right way to find the solution’. Even if you don’t know the answer to that, if it’s a subject you’re good at, you either know what to look up, or a way to fumble your way through.

However, if it’s a subject you’re bad at, you can’t consult the dictionary, you can’t use workbooks as a reference, and you also can’t search for it online. If that is the case, what should you do? If you asked me this question a few months ago, I probably wouldn’t have been able to answer. However, now it’s as clear as day to me. You just rely on others. If you sit on someone else’s shoulders, you can see even farther ahead of you. Teaching each other in order to improve the subjects you’re bad at is a completely new idea to me.

When it comes to Asamura-kun... I mean Nii-san, he taught me from time to time. I would show my weaknesses and ask for the answer. At the same time, if I learn of someone else’s weakness, I try to teach them if I can. It’s a classic give & take. It should be familiar logic to me, yet I never could do this sort of thing before.

But now I understand. Relying on other people is a skill. Proficiency requires training. I hated relying on others, as well as being relied on. After all, if they expected something from me, I wouldn’t know what to do in order to make them happy. As long as I can’t even take a tiny glimpse inside someone else’s mind, if I don’t directly hear what they want from me, I have no way of knowing what it is. Being able to guess what they wanted would be a convenient skill—that’s what I always thought.

If you have anything you want, then just ask. If there are things you don’t want people to do, tell them. If you exchange your feelings with someone, and adjust to each other, then everyone can be happy. This thought is still deeply engraved into me, and I don’t believe it to be wrong. But that means going against my policy. After all, the one person I would have to reveal my feelings to, the one person I would

have to adjust to, is the one person I can never tell about my feelings.

I remembered my biological father and Mom. Even though Mom worked on the side to support him after he failed at his company, he started resenting her when she found actual success. It was so unreasonable. It's not like I've suddenly forgiven my biological father. I just have the ability to understand him a bit. He couldn't show his weakness to Mom. He couldn't rely on her. He could not create a give & take relationship with Mom. He didn't have the skills to rely on his wife.

So am I not the same? I had no problem telling him about my problem with modern Japanese. And yet I cannot express this feeling inside my chest. My reasoning is that it would be bad if I guessed what it was. But is that really all it is?

“...ki. Saaaakiiii!”

“Eh?” I raised my head to find Maaya waving her hand in front of my face.

“Aren't you hungry?”

When she asked me that, I realized that my stomach was faintly grumbling. When I checked my phone's clock, I saw that it was 11:57 am.

“Eh, it's lunchtime already?”

“Yup. So, what should we do? Order something? Maybe make something simple?” Maaya asked. There's no way we can just make food for six people, though.

Ordering out food will be expensive as well.

“I'll go to the nearest convenience store and buy something.”

“Mm, should we all tag along?”

“We'd just make the store more crowded. If you tell me what you want, then I can buy it.”

“You try to be mindful of every small thing... Alright, I’ll prepare some small dishes then!”

I started noting down everyone’s orders and soon realized that it turned out to be quite a lot. Especially when it came to drinks. Then again, I usually go shopping for a lot of things at the same time, so it sounds doable.

“It’ll be tough carrying all of that on your own, right? Let me come to help you carry it.”

“Ah... Yeah, please do, then.”

Shinjou-kun offered to help, so we both set out for the convenience store. Maaya and the others stayed behind, making some simple dishes.

The convenience store was fairly close to her apartment. If you faced the main street, in the diagonally opposite corner was an Italian chain restaurant that is fairly popular with students. That reminds me, I saw the billboard for a prep school on the way here, and it turned out to be the one Asamura-kun is attending. Then again, there’s only a handful of popular ones, so it’s not that big of a coincidence.

...Wait, this isn’t good. I started thinking about Asamura-kun again. I can’t do that. I’ve decided to forge new relationships. We quickly found the convenience store, which stood out thanks to their red and green billboard, and bought bread, *onigiri*, some sandwiches, and other snacks. We also bought three large bottles of tea just to make sure. While I was paying for everything at the register, Shinjou-kun grabbed the heavy plastic bag with the bottles inside and carried it himself.

“You can split some stuff with me.”

“Then please do.”

I said and stuffed the bag of potato chips into my own plastic bag. That’s not fair. He’s basically carrying everything on his own right now.

“I see.”

“Hm?”

Seeing Shinjou-kun's smile, I remembered some of my female classmates talking about how popular he is. It finally clicked for me. He really seems like a gentleman.

“Just... Thanks for carrying all of that.”

“You're carrying some stuff yourself, right?”

“You're not wrong, but still.”

Well, I'm a bit twisted in that regard, and I feel a lot more comfortable if I get stuff foisted onto me rather than taken from me, so I simply think he doesn't need to be that considerate. All I want to do is to carry my own belongings. Then again, I almost tripped while exiting the convenience store, so I only felt more embarrassed. Thankfully, Shinjou-kun lent me a shoulder, so I made it outside without falling over.

“T-Thanks.”

“It's no big deal.”

Or so he says, but he has two heavy bags in his arms, and he's still supporting a girl like this.

“You can rely on me more.” He muttered, but I really would rather not fall over like that.

Otherwise, I wouldn't even be able to confidently live on my own. But because he helped me like this, I already started having doubts about if I might actually be helpless on my own.

“Say, Ayase.”

I was lost in thought, but when he spoke my name it brought me back to reality.

“I heard you and Asamura are siblings.”

The words got stuck in my throat.

“That... a few people know already.”

“I wonder. I actually heard it from Asamura himself.”

“Huh...?”

“At the parent-teacher meeting, I happened to see his mother enter the classroom with you, so I asked him about it.”

“Ahh... I see.”

I felt relieved. I never expected Asamura-kun to be the type of person to tell people about us being siblings, but given the circumstances, I understood that it couldn't have been helped. Shinjou-kun must have realized that I evidently didn't know how to continue the conversation, so he changed the subject.

“Ayase, you really are so disciplined and down to earth. I thought you must have had a younger brother instead.”

“Not really, it's normal.”

I really am not someone who can always stay rational.

“It sure looks that way.”

“You think too highly of me. If anything, you're the one who has everything under control. You feel like an older brother.”

“I actually have a younger sister.”

“I see... Are you close?”

“Somewhat? As much as normal siblings are.”

“So you help her carry heavy stuff like this?”

“Urk, well, that's normal.”

“Pull on her hand so that she doesn't fall over?”

“When we were both younger.”

The reason I felt like teasing him a bit was that I bet his younger sister would be able to brag about having an older brother like him.

“You really care for your sister. I see. I think that’s amazing.”

“It’s what a normal older brother would do.”

After hearing that, I once again found myself agreeing with him. It would be the normal thing to do as an older brother. All the things Asamura-kun did for me—look for a part-time job, help me with my studies, find a way to help me study—did he do all of those things as an older brother? Once again I found myself thinking about him. The next time I raised my head to look around, we had already reached the flat.

The study session ended at around 6 pm. At the end of September, the sun would start to set fairly early, at around half past 5 pm. Although a bit of light remained in the sky for now, it’ll get dark quickly, which was why this was the perfect time to end things.

Maaya was also informed that her family, with the younger brothers, would return a bit after 6 pm. The studying got derailed a few times here and there, but I think we made good progress. At the very least, I feel like I’ve improved myself.

Upon leaving the flat, I noticed that the eastern sky was already colored in the shade of night, whereas the west still had a bit of red and orange left. Maaya offered to see us off to the train station, but we insisted that she should stay at home and wait for her brothers. That’s why it was just the five of us now. The last time we talked like that was back during our day at the pool, and I unexpectedly had a lot of fun then.

“Ayase.”

A voice called out to me, stopping me in my tracks.

“Shinjou-kun?”

“Do you have a moment?”

With this odd manner of calling out to me, I felt like something was off. The others were walking ahead without us, but we should be able to catch up soon enough.

“They’ll leave us behind, you know?”

“There’s something I want to talk about.”

“Yes?”

“Mm...Well, how do I put this?” Shinjou-kun lined up next to me and started walking again.

He seems to be conscious of the people ahead of us, like he doesn’t want to get too close?

“Do you need something?”

“Well, I was thinking that it was really today.”

“Yeah, the summer heat sure isn’t letting up this year. At least the cicadas stopped chirping, but it still feels like a summer afternoon.”

Even so, the seasons are slowly changing. Back a few weeks ago, when the entire island was colored red during the heatstroke warning that came on TV, it’s now changed into somewhat of a yellow. The sunflowers growing at the corner of the streets had started to wither as well, and the clouds in the sky had stopped glowing deep red in the evening. Instead, they were a calm fall color.

The lights from the street lamps didn’t give off a warm, oppressive light, but rather one that allowed you to calm down, creating a relaxing walk home during the sunset. The shadows we cast on the street grew longer and longer, until Shinjou-kun slowed down, eventually coming to a halt altogether. Seeing no other option, I stopped as well. I realized that Shinjou-kun’s face was turned towards me. The way his gaze was fixated on me caused me to feel restless.

“I like you.”

He said, and right when I was about to raise my voice, I swallowed it back down. He must have felt anxious because I stayed quiet, because

he made up his mind, and repeated his words.

“I like you, Ayase.”

“Oh, really.”

Wait, hold on. That’s not the right response. We both went quiet, and an awkward silence followed.

“...Um, thanks. I’m happy you feel this way, but—” I searched for the right words.

This is a confession, right? What should I do? I never would have expected Shinjou-kun to feel this way towards me. How should I turn him down..... But right when I thought that, I was surprised at myself. Why am I immediately thinking about how to reject him? I know how charming of a person Shinjou-kun is. After watching him all day, I realized that he isn’t a bad person in the slightest. I know that several of my female classmates are watching him with gazes of interest and affection. Thinking about it rationally, he’s the type of person who anyone would totally be fine with. He’s kind and considerate. If I were his younger sister, I’d surely feel blessed.

When he called out to me a moment ago, I somehow felt restless. I probably had guessed something like this would happen, but I had decided to ignore it.

“—I’m sorry.” I turned towards Shinjou-kun, deeply lowering my head as I apologized. “I can’t see you in that way...”

“But you’re not going out with anyone, right?”

“Eh, that’s... true...”

“If so, then I’d like you to go out with me. You might start to see me in that way eventually, no?”

That’s... I don’t know.

“Or is it just that you have someone you like, but you haven’t confessed to them yet?”

“I... don’t.”

“Even so, you won’t go out with me?”

“Even so, I won’t go out with you.”

I wonder why. I simply can’t see a future where I ever come to like him. I know that he’s a good person, and I’m sure he’s a great older brother, and yet...

“So maybe you actually... towards Asamura—”

“Eh?”

“No, it’s nothing... I understand. I’ll give up. I don’t want to ruin my relationship with a classmate I’m on good terms with.”

“...Shinjou-kun.”

“Yeah, I guess I should hang around Asamura some more.”

His words made me twitch in shock.

“Why?”

Why did he mention Asamura-kun now?

“You like your older brother, right?”

“That’s...” I couldn’t immediately deny it.

I found myself not wanting to affirm it.

“Ahah, so you’re not denying it. Even though you immediately rejected me in a heartbeat.”

“As an older brother, that is.”

“Hmm? Well, I’ll leave it at that. If I can understand what kind of guy he is and why you like him so much, maybe I’ll still have a chance myself.” He said it like he was joking, but I couldn’t really follow his logic.

Even if you act like the older brother of the person you confessed to, you'll only end up being liked as an older brother type of person, no? That logic felt odd to me, but he's not a bad person, so I would be happy if Asamura-kun made some more friends with him. Just then, I heard voices calling for Shinjou-kun and I. They came from our classmates, who were waiting for us to catch up with them.

Night was starting to push away the sunset. The curtain had started to lower, bringing an end to this day, pulling the next season closer. By the time we reached the train station, the world had gone dark, and night fully welcomed us.

I was about to call for the elevator when I realized that I had gotten a LINE message from Asamura-kun, saying that he was going to take a detour on the way home, and that he would be home late. When I think of him being together with Yomiuri-senpai again, I felt my chest tightening up, gloomy feelings filling the void. *That damn delinquent*, I cursed him, but I also felt relieved for some reason. My head feels hot. I think I should refrain from looking at his face tonight.

'However, in the event that you interact with another interesting boy, and your own feelings still don't change despite that, then make sure to treasure whatever feelings you end up with.'

What Professor Kudou said came back to mind. Her words made it sound like she knew the whole truth, which gave them an odd charm, and they felt like they pushed me forward, even if the end of it all would be me going against modern ethics and morals.

I need time to cool down. I should keep my distance from him for at least one day, making sure I don't run into him. But if tomorrow comes, I've calmed down, and my conclusion still hasn't changed, then...

"Um...?"

"Eh? Ah, I'm sorry, please go ahead!"

Another resident of the flat called out to me, and I realized that I had been standing in front of the elevator this entire time, simply spacing

out. I watched the person enter the elevator, waving my hand at them with a wry smile until the door closed.

—*I'm totally messed up.*



Chapter 13: 28th of September (Monday) – Asamura Yuuta

The rumbling sound of the A/C was a lot quieter than yesterday. It's probably because of the temperature going down day by day, but by the time I actually notice the seasons changing, it always seems that it happens on one day. That Monday, my old man left the house earlier than usual. He still had a mountain's worth of work waiting for him, so he left early without even eating breakfast. Akiko-san herself had yet to come home from work, which meant it was just Ayase-san and I. With high expectations, I opened up the rice cooker that morning and let out a voice of admiration.

“Woah, that looks delicious.”

A pleasant sweet scent drifted upwards, and I saw small yellow pearls swimming in the sea of white rice. Are these small yellow fragments possibly...?

“We'll be having chestnut rice today.” Ayase-san turned around while warming up the miso soup.

“Chestnut... I see, it's that season already.”

This was yet another small but significant change. These kinds of changes pile up, influencing your perception until you finally realize that the season has changed.

“I was thinking of eating breakfast together today. Do you mind?”

“Not at all.”

Since it felt like Ayase-san had been avoiding me a lot lately, I was surprised to hear that response. However, I also felt the same, so I was more than happy to. Not to mention that there was something I wanted to talk about anyway. So we prepared everything for our first breakfast together after a long break and put our hands together.

“That reminds me, I also bought some *ginkgo* nuts and *shiitake* mushrooms.”

“*Ginkgo* nuts and *shiitake* mushrooms? Are you making *chawanmushi*¹?

“Correct. I’m busy in the morning, so I don’t have time to boil them, but I figured I’d make it for dinner at least.”

“That sounds great.”

This nonchalant but enjoyable conversation began, and we started talking about everything that had happened recently, almost as if to make up for the lack of conversation we had over the past month.

“Oh yeah, you mentioned you ate out somewhere with someone yesterday, right?”

“Yeah, at an Italian restaurant. It was cheap and affordable, just like everybody says.” I answered, and asked a question myself. “That reminds me, I thought I saw you yesterday, Ayase-san. I think you were shopping at a convenience store?”

“Eh?” Ayase-san’s eyes opened wide. “Ah, now that you mention it, I saw an Italian family restaurant across the street. You were eating there, huh?”

“So it was you, Ayase-san. I thought I was just seeing things. I think you were with one of your classmates.”

“Probably when we were out shopping. His name is Shinjou-kun. He’s one of the members of our study group. He also went with us to the pool last summer.”

Upon hearing his name, I remembered something. He’s the guy who called out to me after the parent-teacher meeting ended. The one carrying the tennis racket. A faint sense of unease filled my heart. Even though I have no right to feel this way, I can’t fight against it.

“We didn’t have anything to eat for lunch, or snacks in general. We also couldn’t make something at home with the number of people we had.”

“Ahh, so that’s why.”

“Yep. I was actually planning on going alone, but in the end, Shinjou-kun helped me a lot while tagging along.”

I see. That explains a lot.

“Can I ask you something as well?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Yesterday, you came home fairly late, right? You told me beforehand that you would. Where did you go, though?”

I found it rather odd and surprising that Ayase-san would ask me that.

“After my shift at work ended, I took a stroll through Shibuya.”

“Simply walking around? With Yomiuri-san?”

“No, no. The two of us ate lunch together, and she then invited me out for the evening—”

“Wait.”

I closed my mouth.

“That person... is a girl?”

“Huh...?”

That’s what you’re latching onto?

“Well, yeah.”

“Hmm... I see. So?”

For some reason, Ayase-san sounded a bit agitated. Then again, it might just be me interpreting that reaction the way it would be most convenient for me. When I thought about that, my mind once again drifted towards that particular thought.

'I won't have any great expectations from you, so I want you to do the same for me.'

The meaning behind Ayase-san's probing expression back then... Did she really not expect anything? And that question goes for me as well. Because in reality—I was hoping for something from her. Hoping that she would show a special kind of emotion only directed at me.

"So I've been thinking about some stuff."

This time, what Fujinami-san said was what was playing back in my mind.

'That's why I don't think you should lie to yourself. A lie can't continue forever.'

This emotion growing deep inside of my chest won't go away. If so—

"I'd like us to adjust to each other." I declared with determination in my voice.

"In regards to what?"

"You see, I... towards you, Ayase-san, I... have this special emotion in my heart, it seems like."

The moment these words left my mouth, I did feel a lingering regret in my chest. However, once I've said those words, I can't take them back. I may be determined, but regret will always follow any decision. Even so, the moment my words reached Ayase-san, her expression changed drastically.

"Wha... Huh? Um... wait... you're lying."

"I'm not lying."

"...Is this some sort of joke?"

"I wouldn't joke about something like this."

"Yeah...you're right. You're not the kind of person who would say

these kinds of things, **Asamura-kun.**”

Ah.

“Wait, did you just—”

“Eh? Ah—” Ayase-san closed her mouth.

“No, never mind, that’s not important right now,” I said.

“You’re... right. So, this, well... emotion.” She urged me to continue.

“I like you...I think.”

Ayase-san’s eyes opened wide. Her lips were about to form a smile, but she quickly closed them tightly again.

“Is that the kind of emotion a man has towards a woman? Or something you feel as a brother towards your younger sister?”

I didn’t think she would answer my confession with a question.

“Wha?”

“Wanting to touch them, wanting to hug them, feeling jealous when seeing them with someone else, is it that kind of emotion?”

I nodded. After all, this perfectly described how I felt. I realized it last summer, and I thought *‘Ah, I like her.’* I don’t want to believe that I could feel something like that towards my younger sister. And yesterday, when I saw her with another boy, I was filled with this nasty and grotesque emotion. If not jealousy, what else would you call it? That’s why I’m sure these feelings I have are not directed at her as my younger sister, but as a woman. That’s what I told her.

“But there’s no way this kind of emotion would be born between siblings, right?”

This time, I couldn’t argue back. But at the same time, I remembered something. I remembered Akiko-san, Ayase-san’s mother, at the parent-teacher meeting. She was so overwhelmed upon hearing what I said that she hugged me so passionately. Is that something normal

for the Ayase family?

“No no no, wait a second, Ayase-san.”

“Just the other day, I was told about this myself... When two people of the opposite sex suddenly live together, and if they both didn’t have much experience with the opposite sex, the moment they interact more with each other, it’s easier to develop something resembling romantic feelings, you know.”

I started thinking. Basically, because I was never satisfied while living with my biological mother, I would immediately develop something close to romantic feelings the moment I lived with a woman?

“No, but, it’s just something that can happen, right?”

“But it’s not impossible.”

“That’s true, but...”

“What about the possibility that your affection for your younger sister has just gotten stronger?”

No, there’s no way that’s... possible, right? However... When Ayase-san says it with such confidence, the determination and certainty I had until now started to feel like it had burned up in flames.

“If so... then I myself can’t say for certain.”

I personally was confident that I am not well-acquainted with this kind of emotion. Being confident in not being confident sure sounds pathetic, to be honest. Eventually, Ayase-san’s expression changed, and she averted her gaze. After that, no proper conversation was born, and we simply continued eating breakfast in awkward silence.

Over this past month, I’ve continued to avert my eyes from this emotion. Because I am Ayase-san’s... older brother. I tried talking with other people, other girls, seeing the good sides about them. But in the end... this emotion that I have for Ayase-san is something different, something... special. But she says that this emotion might only be something I feel as her older brother?

After we finished eating breakfast, Ayase-san quickly cleaned up her dishes and prepared to head off to school as always. I chased after her. At this rate, the same back and forth I've experienced over this past month will repeat. I rushed towards Ayase-san, who was changing into her outdoor shoes at the front entrance. Once she was done with that, she stood up and stopped moving entirely.

“Ayase-san.”

“You know,” Ayase-san said, her back still turned towards me. “**I don't hate it.**”

Huh? What do you mean by that—I wanted to ask, but before I could even open my mouth, Ayase-san turned around towards me. The shoes she had just put on were thrown off in a hurry, and she grabbed my hand, pulling me after her with strength you wouldn't expect from her slender arms. Overwhelmed by her sudden and unexpected pushiness, I could simply follow her as she dragged me to her room. She closed the door, locked it, and confirmed that all the curtains were pulled close as well, and then turned towards me again —

“Huh?”

Time—stopped. It took my head a few moments to fully grasp what just happened, what she had done to me. The first word filling my head: Warm. And then, I don't even know how to describe it, but what appeared next in my mind was a simple word that almost made me burst out smiling—I felt **happiness**.

The sensation of our touching bodies, overlapping, sharing, and melting each other's warmth into one. Her arms tightly squeezed me, as they wrapped around my back. Even though such an action symbolized restriction, which we both despised, it now made me feel happy that I was needed by her, and I was about to wrap my arms around her back myself, returning my emotions. However, she had already moved away from me at that point.



“Did that... calm you down?”

“Huh?”

“Thank you for being so courageous, Asamura-kun. If I had to think about all of that, all on my own, I wouldn’t even know how painful that could have been... But you carried something so heavy.”

“That... is true, I guess.”

“But, don’t worry. I think I can share that baggage with you.”

In reality, before any happiness set in, I just felt relieved. My confession could very well have led to our relationship completely breaking apart. It’s not like I have any particular charming traits, and I’m not nearly as popular as that Shinjou guy. We’re also tied down by our family’s situation. It was definitely a possibility that I could have lost everything with that confession. That’s why this hug from Ayase-san right now felt like a justification, or a stamp of approval.

“This emotion you mentioned, even if it’s from the point of view of an older brother, or anything beyond that, I don’t hate it at all. In fact, I’m happy.”

“Ayase-san, do you—?”

“I don’t know. Do I feel this way because we’re siblings, or not?”

“Ayase-san...”

“But, my desire to reassure you with this hug was real. Because I would be happy if someone hugged me when I was going through a tough time. Without putting a special tag to it, simply stating my feelings, this would be it.”

“...Yeah.”

I was probably the same.

“Let’s adjust like we always would. I don’t want to trouble our parents. You’re the same, right, Asamura-kun?”

“Yeah. I want them to be happy because they deserve it.”

“Following that line of thought, if you’re close with other girls, I will feel jealous and gloomy. How about that?”

“Same here. I don’t want to restrain you, but I didn’t really like the sound of that study session.”

“Got it. Me either. I don’t like the idea of you walking around Shibuya with that girl you just mentioned.”

“Sorry.”

“There’s no need for you to apologize. We both have our own relationships we have to tend to... So you know. This jealousy, I think that it’s very possible to exist between simple brothers and sisters.”

“...Maybe.”

I slowly started to see what she was getting at.

“If we suddenly said that we wanted to be a couple, I’m sure we’d surprise our parents. That’s why, I’ll go with ‘Asamura-kun’ as always, and in front of them, it’ll be ‘Nii-san’—So that we’re just siblings... No, not quite.” Ayase-san shook her head. “As step-siblings who have a specially close distance, gradually growing more attached... how does that sound?”

“So we’ll hide it from our parents?”

“...It’s not something we should do. I know.”

Carrying what could be romantic feelings and hugging each other... The moment we did something like this that we couldn’t show our parents, we had strayed off the path of what was right. However, if I wanted to remain just and right, I would be unable to be honest with my true feelings. The only way to break this dilemma was to accept the fact that we are in the wrong, and still keep pushing forward our own desires.

“No matter what shape it may be, simply knowing that you’ve accepted me like this is more happiness than I could ask for.”

“...Same here.”

Once again these days with my step-sister changed form, and were filled with secrecy under the pretense of prolonging our relationship as siblings. Honestly speaking, I can’t say with confidence that we can keep this up for too long. Right now, I’m satisfied with just this

one hug, but once these emotions grow stronger, I don't know how far they will go, and how good I will be at holding them back.

As we left the flat, a chilly fall breeze immediately blew against us, signaling the beginning of a new season. However, I felt no need to wear warm clothes and protect myself against the cold, as my heart and every part of my body was filled with a pleasant warmth.

1 Savoury steamed egg custard with chicken, mushrooms, etc.

Afterword

Thank you very much for buying the 4th volume of the novelized “Gimai Seikatsu” series. I am the original creator of the YouTube series, as well as the author of this novel series, Mikawa Ghost. Since we had a lot of painful developments during the course of volume 3, I’ve decided to add a few more sweet and heart-warming scenes in volume 4. Personally, I believe that the people who enjoy the happy life of these two together will be satisfied. As for how their relationship, which is hard to define as ‘lovers,’ will progress from now on, and how their lives will change while adapting to this, I’d be happy if you stayed around and continued to watch over them.

After this, I have a bit of an announcement for a change. As part of this year’s ‘Kono Light Novel ga Sugoi! 2022’, Gimai Seikatsu managed to achieve third place in the newcomer category. This, of course, is all thanks to all of our fans passionately voting, so I am eternally grateful. I will do my utmost to continuously bring you a series worthy of such a position, so I hope for your continued support.

On to thanks. To my illustrator Hiten-san, Nakashima Yuka-san who plays the role of Ayase Saki, Amasaki Kouhei-san who plays the role of Asamura Yuuta, Suzuki Ayu-san who plays the role of Narasaka Maaya, Hamano Daiki-san who plays the role of Narasaka Maaya, Suzuki Minori-san who plays the role of Yomiuri Shiori, the video director Ochiai Yusuke and everybody else involved in the YouTube video production, as well as everybody else who helps with publishing and distribution, and of course all my dear readers, thank you very much as always.

I may not have much space to fully convey my gratitude, but it really means the world to me.

This has been Mikawa Ghost.

Credits

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